

Anniversaries are important. If you don't agree, just find out what happens when you forget a wedding anniversary.

The story is told of a husband who was in big trouble when he forgot his twentieth wedding anniversary. His wife told him... "Tomorrow there better be something in the driveway for me that goes zero to 200 in 2 seconds flat". The next morning the wife found a small package in the driveway. She opened it and found a brand new bathroom scale. Funeral arrangements for the husband were arranged immediately.

Today we celebrate three anniversaries.

Sixteen years ago on May 16, 1994 this building was dedicated to the glory of God and the Robina-Surfers Paradise Uniting Church had a brand, spanking new home.

Twenty five years ago on May 22, 1985 Newlife Care was Incorporated by John and Annette Tully as a ministry of Gold Coast people helping Gold Coast people in need.

Finally and almost importantly, with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost we celebrate the birth of the global church, commissioned by Jesus to make disciples of all nations.

Pentecost is one of the seven major festivals of the Jewish faith. Jerusalem would have been buzzing with tens of thousands of pilgrims from all the Roman Empire. In Jesus day the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, celebrated the end of the wheat harvest and commemorated the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. It was a one-day celebration during which special offerings would be made in the temple.

And so fifty days after Jesus' resurrection and ten days after his ascension into heaven, 120 of Jesus' followers are waiting for the promise that Jesus offered them – the gift of the Holy Spirit. Let's turn to Luke's account to remind us what happens:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.
(Acts 2:1-4)

Just outside the front doors of our church is a foundation stone that commemorates the opening of this facility. This is the date we have chosen to celebrate our Church's birthday. But our birthday can be traced back a lot further – indeed right back to the events of Pentecost we have just read. We are not 16 years old; we're almost 2000 years old, which leads me to my main, overarching point for today. Are you ready for it?

Newlife Uniting is a Pentecostal Church.

Shocking, isn't it?

Some of you are thinking, but we are a Uniting Church, not the Assemblies of God? But I'm not talking about denominational heritage.

Some of you are thinking, but I don't speak in tongues? But I'm not talking about particular charismatic gifts, as important as they are.

Some of you are thinking, 'I knew it, when they brought those drums in it was the beginning of the end!' But I'm not talking about worship style or prayer style or any other style.

Newlife Uniting is a Pentecostal Church in that we are a community of believers called by Jesus to bear witness to Him. In this we are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

We are a community of believers who, in the Pentecostal power of the Holy Spirit, seek to see our world transformed one changed life at a time.

Not convinced? Let's explore just some of the marks of the 1st century church – the Pentecost fuelled church – and see how Newlife stacks up.

The Pentecostal Church Preached Boldly

In Jesus' day a Rabbi who had authority – who was respected by the people – would sit down in order to teach. By contrast, a messenger or herald with a message to announce would stand up to proclaim it. On hearing the confusion in the crowd about the strange Pentecostal phenomenon like tongues of fire and Galilean peasants speaking in languages they have no knowledge of, Peter responds. We read:

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd... (Acts 2:14)

This is one of the Holy Spirit's first miracles. Fear-filled Peter risks the ridicule of the crowd to preach boldly the good news of Jesus. The second miracle is that he preaches a cracker of a sermon. Just read it. Before Pentecost Peter was a man who opened his mouth before engaging his brain. Before Pentecost Peter approached life in this way: Ready, Fire, Aim. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter preaches a message with laser-sharp insight. Now for Peter it is: Ready, Aim - FIRE!

And it did not end with Peter and Pentecost. As we explore Acts we will find the early church preached wherever they could – in Jerusalem's temple courts, synagogues, markets, homes, prisons, court rooms and in the open air.

The primary ministry of the Holy Spirit is to equip believers to testify and point towards Jesus, crucified and risen. This will not always be a popular message. In fact mostly it won't, as the early Christians discovered with the cost of their lives. But in the story of Jesus Christ is God's plan of salvation for the whole creation.

We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Corinthians 1:23-24)

In the power of the Holy Spirit the Pentecostal church preached boldly, and at our best, so do we.

One of Newlife's eight stated values is passionate outreach. We believe the gospel of Jesus Christ changes lives, and wherever that gospel is preached, God will reap a harvest. Every week we have six worshipping communities that gather in our name – Crossroads, Youthstreet, Sunday morning times three and 12two. At every celebration we are committed to preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ as proclaimed by biblical and orthodox faith. From this commitment we will not waver.

It would be so easy for Crossroads to have some lovely singing, great food and activities and skip the sermon. The government who fund us wouldn't mind. But Crossroads is church and church is where the gospel is preached boldly.

On Friday night at Youthstreet we could just focus on giving teenagers an end of week escape from the grind of school and keep it fun and light. We could probably even attract a bigger crowd if we did. But Youthstreet is church and church is where the gospel is preached boldly.

And where the gospel is preached confidently, God does his amazing work of changing people's lives. Recently a friend read me a text he received from someone who attended our church a couple of weeks ago for the first time I think. They came along to 12two. I have permission to share it with you:

U missed a fantastic service on Sunday, I had the most amazing experience, he spoke to me from within, it felt like he cleansed my whole body and I couldn't help but cry. It was amazing 😊

Our world is transformed one changed life at a time. Only the gospel can change lives. And the gospel is heard when it is preached boldly and confidently.

The Pentecostal Church Embraced Diversity

At Pentecost Jerusalem's population was swelled by pilgrims from all over the known world. Many more Jews lived outside Palestine than in it in the great Diaspora – the scattering. The streets would have been full of a cacophony of dialects. Luke makes a point of listing sixteen different nationalities who heard the Spirit-filled disciples praising God in their own language. After standing up, Peter addresses the crowd and starts:

...Fellow Jews and all you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you... (Acts 2:14b)

Peter addresses everybody – fellow Jews and all who live in Jerusalem. Peter addresses all who will lend him an ear – Jew and non-Jew (Gentile) alike. In that day cities like Jerusalem and others throughout the Roman Empire were tormented by ethnic, tribal and religious tension. Only with the fierce rule of the Roman military kept these tensions from bubbling over. But right from the outset, the Christian Community stood in stark contrast to the ethnic and religious separatism of the day. The church was made up of a diverse group of people often with nothing much in common except their shared faith in Jesus Christ. Paul powerfully claimed this commonality in his letter to the Colossians:

Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. (Colossians 3:11)

In the power of the Holy Spirit the Pentecostal church embraced diversity. And at our best, so do we.

We are ethnically diverse. Without trying too hard, I was able to identify 24 different nationalities represented through birth in this congregation. Every continent other than Antarctica is represented here, as well as every state in Australia. We even welcome Kiwis!

Last year I conducted a little experiment which illustrated most of us are from somewhere else. If you were born on the Gold Coast, raise your hand...

We are diverse across the generations. Our ages range from nought to ninety-six. In an increasingly segmented world where we only relate to those like us, where we withdraw to the comfort of our homogenous enclaves – where else but the church can such diversity work and be celebrated?

While we are diverse in so many ways, and while sometimes that diversity feels like an uncomfortable pair of shoes we have to wear – we do wear it and are shaped by it because as Paul reminds us we all drink from the same Spirit

The Pentecostal Church Gave Generously

From the outset the Pentecostal church had a radical approach to money and possessions. They shared and supported and gave. They practiced radical generosity.

Some years after Pentecost the church in Jerusalem fell on hard times as famine and unrest gripped the city. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, arranged for a collection to be taken up across the churches outside Palestine to support their brothers and sisters they had never met. Paul writes to the church in Corinth about the generosity of the Macedonian church:

Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. (2 Corinthians 8:2-4)

In the power of the Holy Spirit the Pentecostal Church gave generously. And at our best, so do we.

Over the past four years our tithes and offerings as a church have increased by 52%. The graph on the screen shows the trend up until and including this year. Our Tithes and offerings is the giving of our first and best to the work of God through

the church. In increasing numbers, many of us are discovering the Spirit-filled liberation of giving to God proportionally, generously, sacrificially and cheerfully.

But this is not the end of the story of what the Spirit is working in our wallets, purses and bank accounts. You have given wonderfully to the work of God beyond this congregation through Newlife Care and our Acts 1:8 Mission Projects, as the table on the screen illustrates.

The Pentecostal Church Acted Justly

Roman cities were brutal places. Unemployment was rife, hunger was normal and exploitation of the vulnerable was common place. Very quickly the early church began to enjoy a reputation for caring for not only its own poor, but for the poor outside its doors. The Pentecostal Church knew what faith without works was dead. James stated:

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress.
(James 1:27a)

In the power of the Holy Spirit the Pentecostal Church Acted Justly. And at our best, so do we.

The ministry of Newlife Care is not an add-on to all the other more important stuff we do as a church. The ministries of Newlife Care – ministries like Streetcare – are central to who we are as church.

In the end, the church is only truly the church when it is good news to the poor.

Similarly, Crossroads is an expression of our belief that all human beings, no matter their ability or disability, are created in the image of God and as such have unique value and worth.

The Pentecostal Church Failed Spectacularly

We would not have much of a New Testament beyond the gospels if it wasn't for the fact the early church failed so often and so well. For example:

The Church in Galatia was confused
The Church in Corinth was hedonistic and divided
The Church in Ephesus had lost its first love
The Churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia were almost broken by persecution
The Church in Pergamum was captured by false teaching
The Church at Thyatira had a crisis of leadership
The Church in Sardis was asleep in its own 'good works'
The Church in Laodicea had settled for lukewarm comfort

Then there were the personal disputes, like Peter and Paul, Paul and Barnabas, some women in Philippi...

The early church was marked by failures large and small, and disputes petty as well as important.

BUT, in the power of the Holy Spirit and by the grace of God, the Pentecostal Church moved past failure into the freedom of God's forgiving love. And, at our best, so do we.

I'd love to put this statement on our letterhead and signs and brochures:

Newlife Uniting Church: *One, big, happy and dysfunctional family.*

What do I mean by dysfunctional?

First are the sins of commission. We lie. We cheat. We harbor grudges. We give in to anger. We think the worst of each other, rather than the best.

Then there are the sins of omission. We fail to forgive, or to give, or to pray, or to serve...

At least, this is true for me. Or am I Robinson Crusoe – all on my own?

Here is yet another reason why I love the church. It is in the church where I am led and learn to confess and repent. It is in the church where I discover that by God's grace no failure is unforgivable, and through the Holy Spirit, no character flaw unchangeable.

We are one big, happy, dysfunctional family. I can't think of where else I'd rather be!

The Pentecostal Church Grew Steadily

At the end of Acts 2 we read:

The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:47b)

Through conversion growth, even in an incredibly hostile environment, the Christian church grew from being a marginal movement in an obscure part of the Roman Empire into a massive and dynamic movement less than 300 years later. Sociologist Rodney Stark estimates the following growth pattern for the church:

Pentecost:	120
150AD	41,000
200AD	218,000
250AD	1,170,000
300AD	6,300,000

In the power of the Holy Spirit the Pentecostal Church grew steadily and exponentially. And, at our best, so do we.

In February this year we made the big move to three morning services. The driver for this big shift was to make room for growth. This table shows how we have been going so far with the change. In 2009 our average Sunday attendance was 731. Since the move to four Sunday services we have averaged 820, an increase of 12%.

As it happens, we grew at the same rate across the whole of 2009.

This table shows our annual growth rates since 2006.

This graph plots our Sunday attendance since 2005. As you can see, God has been steadily growing us. That rate of growth is increasing.

Now attendance figures are just one indicator of church life and health, albeit an important one. Behind these numbers are some even more important ones, like the fact that in 2009 over 50 people made first time commitments to Jesus Christ in our church. Praise God!

In the end, it is the Lord who adds, and the Lord who grows. Unless God builds this church, we labor in vain. True to form, some in the church in Corinth were beset by spiritual pride and competitiveness. Paul gives them a reality check that we do well to heed.

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. (1 Corinthians 3:6-7)

The Pentecostal Church Believed Passionately

Reading the Acts of the Apostles is like immersing yourself in a spiritual adventure story. The pages crackle and spark with spiritual expectation and anticipation. Those early Spirit-filled believers were full of faith and the passionate belief that God could move mountains. That God was involved and engaged in His world and through Jesus had launched a kingdom-making revolution of grace, mercy and love.

In the power of the Holy Spirit the Pentecostal Church believed passionately. And, at our best, so do we.

Sixteen years ago this church was officially opened. Easter two years before that, in 1992, the first service of worship was held on this site. Here is a picture. No buildings, no trees, no houses. Just vacant land with the promise that suburbs would eventually come. By God's grace, and with the gift of faith, we have come a long way.

This church was given birth out of adventurous faith and passionate belief.

Any Financial Planner worth his or her salt will tell you about the miracle of compound interest. That if you deposit money on interest and leave it alone, that if interest rates remain steady, your deposit will soon increase. Soon it will double in size and more through exponential growth. The same principle of exponential growth applied to the early church. And the same can apply to the church of today.

This last graph predicts our Sunday attendance should we maintain the growth rate we have achieved the last two years or so – 12%. In 2009 our attendance was 731. With 12% growth, in 2015 it will be 1444. If we continue to grow at that rate, in 2021, our attendance will be 2850 – more than three times our current attendance.

God grows the church. We don't. But God does call us to plan for, pray for, hope for, expect and anticipate growth.

That is why our current conversation about property development is so critical. We need to plan and make room for the growth we pray and long God will bring. Every extra seat, every square foot of enhanced facility provides an opportunity for people to experience the saving grace of Jesus.

But property development is just one part of our strategy for growth. Another is church planting. Almost four years ago we established to goal to plant five new churches by 2021. Last year we planted our first – Crossroads Helensvale. We will hear more about Crossroads Helensvale in coming weeks – but just a week or so ago, 68 people attended this new community. Praise God!

I am really excited to tell you we have begun our search for person who will lead our next church plant in the Coomera region. Please pray we will be guided by the Holy Spirit as we make this critical appointment. By July 2011 we will launch this new campus.

So let me paint a picture of how Sunday worship at Newlife might look like in 2021.

Here at Greenwich Court we will have three worship services in our new or expanded auditorium. With a seating capacity of 1000, our two morning services have a combined attendance of 1400 and 12two has gone from strength to strength and now has 400 every Sunday evening. 1800 people worshipping here are Greenwich Court every Sunday.

In 2020 we planted the fifth of our additional campuses. Across all five, 1000 people meet every week under the Newlife banner – a network of worshipping communities seeking to reach the Gold Coast with God's love.

Crazy dream? Wishful thinking?

We are a Pentecostal Church. We believe passionately that God can do what to us seems impossible.

When the new office building and Lakeside Lounge was built, a dedication plaque was fixed to the wall just outside the entrance. I walk past it every morning. It's a reminder that we serve a big God who gives us big dreams:

*(God) is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.
(Ephesians 3:20)*

The Pentecostal Church Worshipped Freely

It must have been some site. 120 Galilean peasants – unschooled men and women – speaking foreign languages they had never heard. The question begs to be answered, what were they saying? We don't know exactly, but we do know the subject matter. The bemused foreigners who watched and listened said:

'...we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongue.' (Acts 2:11b)

The disciples were worshipping God with abandon.

In the power of the Holy Spirit, the Pentecostal Church worshipped freely. And, at our best, so do we.

I'll be honest with you. I long for God to lead us into greater freedom in worship. One of the consistent signs of Holy Spirit fuelled revival in the church has been a new freedom in worship. Too often we become obsessed with the forms of worship - our music – our liturgy - rather than the object of our worship – who is the triune God.

And so today we are going to finish with a time of worship. We are going to honor God with our voices and we are going to ask God humbly to break our lives open to receive from him.

To God be the glory, in the church and for evermore.