



## Worship Resources for *Steeple's* Ad Run – Fall 2008

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### Fire or Haze?

Fire is one of the symbols of Pentecost. On the day of the first Pentecost, the Spirit filled the disciples gathered in the upper room, just as Jesus had promised. Those confused and frightened women and men were totally transformed. Conviction replaced confusion, faith supplanted fear, and devotion dispelled doubt. One minute they were hazy on what they were going to do now that Jesus was gone; the next they were literally on fire with the Spirit and the whole world was drawn to the flame.

Fire is a perfect symbol for the impact of the Spirit on the lives of the early Church. It represents both the warmth and light the church brought into the world. Faith became about relationship rather than religion, a matter of the heart and not just the head. There is great power in a relationship with God once you realize it is a relationship of grace. However, if fire is the symbol of the early Church, haze may be the best representation of the modern Church. We talk a lot about grace and God's unconditional love, but the church seems hazy about just how to live that out. More than ever, the world needs a model of how a community can be compassionate progressive and inclusive and still be passionate. The world needs a *growing, liberal, Spirit-filled church*. When was the last time you heard that phrase? By and large, those terms have been mutually exclusive, but they do not have to be. In fact, they were not on the day the Church was born.

Look at the picture of the early Church in the book of Acts. They clearly were Spirit-filled/on fire. Remember, these women and men had been scared and scattered after the death of Jesus, but, when the Spirit of Jesus came upon them, they went out and literally turned the whole world upside down. The book of Acts is an amazing account of their passion, devotion and enthusiasm. They were Spirit-filled, on fire, and I believe they were also liberal, in the best sense of that word. Notice that the first picture we have of the Church is multi-cultural and diverse. People from all over the world were present when the Spirit came, and they all became a part of the Church of Christ right from the start. Diversity and inclusion were initial core values of the Spirit. A spirit-filled church is a place where everyone is genuinely welcome.

Notice also that the early church included and empowered marginalized folk—like women—just as Jesus did in his ministry. Make no mistake. They still were hampered by the sexism of their day, but they were also very clear that God had poured out the Spirit on women and on men, on sons and on daughters! Notice, too, that the early church didn't try to force everyone to hear from God in the same way. There was no need to coerce everyone to conform theologically. That is wonderfully symbolized by the fact that each person heard the Gospel in their own language. And the early church grew despite being considerably more liberal than the religious and political environment in which it was born.

Jesus was crucified by a repressive government and a fundamentalist religious establishment that thought everyone ought to believe the same and behave the same. Then Jesus came along describing God like a farmer scattering seed right and left with reckless abandon, with no need

to control or restrict who receives it, describing the Reign of God as a feast to which everyone was invited. Those images got Jesus crucified ... and they're not much more popular today. Fundamentalist Muslims, Christians and Jews seem determined to eliminate, or at least exclude, all who disagree with them.

Yet that first Pentecost the Spirit added 5,000 people from every nation, race, language and theology to the family gathered in that upper room. So, what was their secret? What is the secret to the Church continuing to grow despite being more liberal than our religious surroundings? Or, more importantly, what is the secret for us continuing to grow spiritually despite the conservative religion that often surrounds us? Must we choose between being passionate and devout, and being cynical and intellectual? Must we choose between relating to God with our heart, and believing in God with our head? Must we decide between piety, devotion and passion, and social activism, intellectual integrity and inclusion?

Spiritual passion is a lot like a fire. It can keep you warm when the winter winds blow against your life. It can give you light when everything else seems to grow dark around you. However, like fire, your spiritual life needs constant fuel. That's why God poured the Spirit upon the Church when it was gathered, not upon random individuals strolling along doing their own thing. Next time you are sitting around a campfire pull a glowing coal from the fire. Then watch as the glow dims and the warmth fades. That's how it is with us when we remove ourselves from those things that can fuel our spirit.

And one last lesson we must learn from the fire. **That which burns must give itself to the flame.** If you and I are to stay on fire, we must continue to give ourselves, our energy, our time, our resources to the flame of the Spirit! God will not abandon us if we do not, but when we close ourselves off in our own little world, looking out only for ourselves, including only "our kind," our spirits grow colder and harder. And just when was the last time you saw a stone on fire?