

Walking A Road Less Traveled

Christ Church Nashville Faces the Twenty-first Century

The core responsibility of a senior pastor is to chart the course for that congregation he serves. He must effectively communicate this intended course; so that the congregation he leads can understand it, evaluate it, and then, either embrace it, modify it, or reject it. Then he and the other leaders of that congregation must empower that course by taking actions consistent with it.

This does not imply that a senior pastor's vision for a congregation should be his own in every sense of the word. The Lord Jesus, the apostles and Christian believers through the ages long ago established what constitutes a Christian church. Any senior pastor must embrace their definition of "church," and do his best to lead the congregation consistent with their teaching.

Even St. Paul affirmed his loyalty to a foundation that had been already established. Therefore, he claimed that his teaching would rest naturally upon that which preceded him. "No other foundation can be laid," he says "than that which is already laid." In his reflections on the Lord's Table, for example he adds, "For I have delivered unto you that which I have received."

We, like St. Paul, must be faithful to "that which has at all times and in all places been believed by the whole people of God." The foundation comes first, both in importance and in the amount of attention we pay to drafting and executing a vision that is uniquely our own.

Unless he is the founder of a new assembly, a senior pastor must also build upon that which immediately precedes him. A local church has a culture of its own, just as each child of a family has his or her own personality. How a local church manifests the Christian message becomes its unique way of being in the world and one cannot radically alter this uniqueness without endangering that church's existence.

A senior pastor of an established church is thus limited in what he can and should offer as his own.

Nonetheless, when God calls (and a congregation affirms) a particular man for a specific era of leadership, it is the responsibility of that man to discern the sorts of emphasis, aims and structure required to express the gifts and calling of the congregation in the era and locale in which he works. Therefore, a part of the discerning process that forms his vision for the church must necessarily be his own gifts, experiences and concerns. A senior pastor must, without either

pride or false humility, assess why God has called specifically him for the work at hand. He must determine what this specific and intentional calling on God's part says about what God intends to do with the congregation now under his charge, at least during the specific era in which it is his responsibility to lead it.

It is in this spirit that I offer the broad parameters of my vision for our congregation. I do this first in a motto and then in four central values I have determined will guide my thoughts and actions in the time the Lord has called me to lead this congregation.

Motto: We open the soul to the presence of God

Four values:

1. We will teach and practice our ancient/future faith
2. We will build a community of caring and growing people
3. We will discover, train and release leaders
4. We will reach the nations here and abroad

The motto speaks to the centrality of worship in our congregation as a soul-opening experience in the felt presence of God. The values define the central focus of our congregational life. I will do all within my power to direct our resources and attention toward these things.

Our Cultural Context

We minister in an era unlike the one in which our church was founded. It is even unlike the era in which we most flourished. Over a decade ago, we entered a new century. The cultural changes we have witnessed already in the first decade of the new millennium have been extraordinary. Those changes suggest profound alterations ahead in the habits, social rhythms and spiritual needs of those we serve.

As we face this new environment, we must realize that we have been equipped to minister effectively to the social world of people who are now in their fifties or older. As the world around us keeps changing, it becomes increasingly important for us to assess and respond to those raised in different times, who come from other nations or from other parts of our own nation.

Our immediate surroundings have become urban and globalized. Reaching the people of our immediate community will thus require continual (and gradual) shifts in their direction.

Doing this unwisely – without a plan or without clear communication -- could alienate our present membership. Conversely, maintaining a culture that is most comfortable to our present membership would risk alienating younger adults and other potential new members from our immediate surroundings.

In other words, cultural change forces us to adapt in ways that will stretch us. However, pastoral concern for our present congregation encourages us to walk carefully and humbly as we adapt.

We want to plan, pray and organize ourselves to become a center of evangelism and community for the emerging culture around us. The cultural diversity that this implies is new for churches in our city. Maintaining a healthy church in such a culture will require leaders with cross-cultural personalities and temperaments. However, the most important thing as we reach toward the culture around us will be to maintain that “faith once and for all delivered to the saints.”

As we grow into the church that wins and discipled the various peoples of our city, we will attract those who find that sort of environment exciting and adventuresome. However, in doing so, we could become increasingly less attractive for those who find such an environment unsettling.

Therefore, we must know our own mind and our own environment. We must respond to God’s call to reach our own environment rather than follow the current models offered by most of America’s great churches, most of whom work in different environments.

We must take a road less traveled.

Focusing Our Attention

There is much to learn from the so called “seeker-sensitive” churches.

For one thing, they woke us up. Thanks to them, it has become impossible to ignore our society’s cultural changes. This in turn has made us aware of the hurdles that often hinder unbelievers from entering our churches.

On the other hand, the so called “seeker-sensitive” churches have probably defined the word “seeker” too narrowly. There are actually multitudes of “seekers” that do not desire the kinds of advertisement, programming and radical restructuring of Christian worship that the seeker-sensitive approach recommends. Furthermore, the price of becoming “seeker sensitive”

has been high. What is gained, after all, if a church learns how to gather thousands but in the process becomes something other than a meeting place between the soul and the presence of God? Surely it is possible for a church, no less than for an individual, to “gain the whole world but lose its own soul.”

A road less traveled would be one that runs the risk of making people uncomfortable in hopes of awakening their soul.

A church that takes such a path will define “love” as a concern for a person’s ultimate eternal state and not a mere sensitivity to a seeker’s temporary mood and comfort.

This road would honor the faith once and for all delivered to the saints and do the necessary work of making that timeless journey attractive to modern people.

It would believe community life to be an essential ingredient of spiritual formation and thus do all within its power to draw its people into an ever deeper commitment to God and to one another.

It would awaken the people’s intellect with a continual presentation of the Word of God and resist much of American Evangelicalism’s present course of excusing ignorance as a form of piety.

It would offer worship that awakens the soul to the presence of God.

It would stop yelling at the culture and offer instead real solutions, artistic creations and acts of service that alleviate human suffering and demonstrate the love of God.

It would mentor its converts to become deeply aware of scriptural truth, become alive in the Holy Spirit and become equipped with the skills needed to excel in their chosen field.

It would learn how to use new communication technology effectively and creatively, but in ways that do not overpower or overshadow worship or biblical teaching.

It would become familiar with post-modern thought and learn to speak the language of Zion to post-modern people in winsome and compelling ways. A backlash is forming against the global secularization of life; a church that takes the road less traveled must identify with and direct this backlash toward an encounter with the living God.

It would see the flood of immigrants into our nation as an act of a sovereign God who has sent the people here to learn of Him and to become His followers. Indeed, it would see the people as an opportunity to grow in God by serving “the least of these” in His name.

It will view the global communications networks as crucial to its expression, community and presence. Therefore, it will invest in the kinds of employees, volunteers, knowledge and hardware/software resources that gives it advantageous access to the nations through this medium.

In short: a church that takes the road less traveled will aim to attract those who long to meet God, learn of His ways, live in authentic community with His people and awaken God's unique calling and purpose for their lives.

Implications

Staff

Our vision will require leaders who know God, understand the present vision of our church and who will learn how to attract, train, honor, maintain, and organize volunteers. We must receive such leaders and make room for their contributions.

Our staff should consist of highly skilled leaders whom we pay well enough to allow them to connect socially with all levels of society represented in our church. They should not be distracted by the sort of financial hardship that drives them to seek second jobs in order to provide for their families. Our staff should require minimum management and be passionately committed to the vision of this congregation.

The central core of the staff should be pastoral – people who care deeply about the spiritual state of the people, know the word of God and who are competent to address the people's spiritual needs. The next group of staff people should be those who manage and organize staff and volunteers and who help focus the church's material and human resources toward our mission. The final group of staff ought to be those who organize our spiritual and artistic productions and who market our products and services.

Our vision thus requires a highly competent, trained and committed staff that solicits, trains, equips and empowers an army of highly competent volunteers. Much of the forward motion of the church should arise from the gifts and vision of volunteers and our staff should mobilize to empower such initiative.

Financial reality, as well as this vision for our future leads us to address the size, competence and organizational structure of our present staff. This is always a difficult and

controversial decision in any church, but one we cannot at any rate, avoid. Therefore we will move forward soon to restructure our staff. Of course we will do this in ways that honor our present staff members as brother and sisters in Christ and which does not expose them to undue hardship.

Property

We have a massive amount of property and facilities. We must use these resources in ways that make them assets rather than liabilities. With this in mind, we will move forward with the following steps:

- We will create strategic alliances with para-church organizations to manage all types of ministries and functions we deem peripheral to worship, teaching and pastoral care. Such alliances can help us focus our pastoral attention upon pastoral issues. They will allow us to review the compatibility and effectiveness of our ministries in ways that do not unduly disrupt our congregational relationships. In short: we will outsource everything that is not a core component of our mission.
- We will invite affiliated ministries to use our property for worship and for founding new congregations. We will establish fee structures that make such joint ventures attractive to others, useful to the kingdom of God and which will lighten our financial burden. We will create a community among these entities to synergize their talents into something mutually beneficial to us all. This approach will allow us to begin new congregations among our various ethnic groups, utilize our property for the kingdom of God in the city and share our financial burden with others who benefit from these facilities.
- We will offer vocational training of various kinds to equip our people for employment, creative expression and spiritual influence within the community.
- We will open a seminary that is vocational (instead of academic) in focus and training. This will allow us to disciple those who are called into ministry into the practical work of pastoral ministry, teaching them how to use the work of scholars but will not necessarily expect them to become scholars. This approach suggests a

partnership with some established seminary (or several of them) to avoid the need for creating our own biblical studies programs.

- We will consider the feasibility of establishing a school (or partnering with an existing school) to educate our children. Offering such a program to our children regardless of financial ability would require a huge investment and a careful description of our intentions because a Christ Church school should excel in education and aim at producing quality students. There are successful models to learn from, (for example, New Hope Academy in Franklin.) Since many of our area public schools are not conducive to growing healthy minded, Christian children, a school may become an essential spiritual tool for leading our children to become disciples. Our present fiscal situation makes it difficult to know how to proceed with this. However, some means of disciplining our children must be found and a school may be necessary to accomplish that.
- Our sanctuary needs an aesthetic and technological upgrade. This is probably not our highest priority but it is a real long-term need and we must determine what this will look like when we become financially ready to move forward with this.

Finances

No matter how noble our vision, we will have no future without continued financial solvency. Therefore, we must focus on the following ongoing economic issues:

- Debt Elimination

In a sound economy our present debt load is not excessive. However, in recessive times our debt becomes a hindrance to growth and sustainability. Under this pastorate, we will not incur new debt. We will also work aggressively to eliminate our present debt.

- Endowments

We are establishing a philosophy and policies for creating financial endowments. These will become increasingly important for reaching our long term goals and for maintaining any current systems that may not be well funded in the future – such as perpetual care for our cemetery. Scholarships, mission's work, and venture capital for

creative projects that proclaim the gospel in our culture are other types of ministries that may be funded in the future by endowment instruments. This is a new but vital area for us.

- Tithing and Stewardship Teaching

Tithing remains our church's central revenue stream. We must therefore be careful how it is protected and used. The legitimate use of tithing funds is broadly described in scripture and we cannot be in the long-term position of subsidizing any ancillary church "businesses" with tithing money. We need other types of revenue streams to address those. Nonetheless, tithing revenue remains crucial to the church and is a part of a disciple's formation in God. Therefore, we will teach our people to adopt the principles of Financial Peace (birthed in this community and which, we believe, constitute a biblical approach to stewardship) and to view tithing as a sacramental, covenant obligation of those who follow Christ.

- Other Revenue Streams

- Products

We will seek to market such products as may be financially profitable to us, in ways that do not jeopardize our tax status or our reputation as an ethical and spiritual corporation.

- Associated Business entities

We will seek to create associations with business entities that share our values and which can be mutually profitable. An example would be a music company that shares revenue with artists in mutually beneficial ways.

- Services

From time to time we offer instruction and consultation to other churches and ministries from our own experience and skills. When such services generate revenue, it should become a part of our church budget.

- Internet Giving

The internet is a structure for collecting funds for all the products and services we offer. Therefore, we will continue to learn more about increasing collections and visibility through this source.

Associations

We will seek friends for our church among people and corporate entities committed to a vision similar to our own. The old denominational structures that served us so well (and for so long) have become ineffective, even for those who remain in them. New structures have arisen to sustain and advance the cause of Christ in the world. For the most part, these structures are not as permanent, are more narrowly focused, and more broadly connected than the old denominational structures. Thus, they work on one thing – clinics for the uninsured, for example – to serve a broad spectrum of church types. Such entities thrive (or disappear) as the need dictates.

Associations with like minded churches, para-churches and ministries allow pastors to focus their attention on the spiritual needs of their flock while leaving more specialized needs to those called and focused upon meeting those kinds of needs. For this reason, churches should not think of themselves as endlessly extending their attention and resources to create ever more complex organizations. Rather they should remain focused on growing and serving the flock while partnering with those who specialize in other crucial areas of ministry.

We will seek to make such associations. We will continually evaluate their effectiveness, ethical character and usefulness in helping us reach our own specific mission.

Conclusion

In the years of my pastorate, I will work to conclude our present pastoral transition, lead the congregation to respond to the demographic and cultural changes around us, work to maintain the biblical fidelity of this flock through teaching the Word of God, serve our community through acts of service, and empower a new generation of leaders to lead the congregation on into this new millennium. To do these things effectively, I will need the sort of authentic unity among our leaders that allows us to make real and informed decisions together.

I believe that this road less traveled is the best way forward. As we walk it together may we, like the men of Emmaus, discover the presence of the risen Christ.