

**“Celebration Sunday”**

The Church of Jesus Christ will never die! The Church of Jesus Christ will never die! (Say it with me.) The Church of Jesus Christ will never die! (Say it again.) The Church of Jesus Christ will never die! It's true. The Church of Jesus Christ will never die! Even when the culture changes and people find it (harder than ever) to find the time...the Church of Jesus Christ will never die!

Even when it appears as if going to church no longer matters (and a growing percentage) of people (in this valley) no longer care, the Church of Jesus Christ will never die!

Even when (in various parts of God's world) it seems as if evil is winning and on the rise and it's hard to find evidence that it is not...the Church of Jesus Christ will never die!

I don't know that we spend enough time reminding ourselves of how true that is and of how essential it is to what we're doing together in this place. If we don't we should, and if we do, then we dare not forget. The Church of Jesus Christ will never die.

And that's why it continues to be a privilege and an honor and (more humbling) than anything else we could ever say (about ourselves) than to be able to say that God has chosen us for this time and this place to represent him to the world! Let that truth sink in (and begin to settle), and then ask yourself if that's not reason enough in itself to celebrate.

We're here today to celebrate what God has been doing in the lives of the people of this community to shape and to mold their lives into the image of Christ, and how (the people of this community) are being called (and used) by God to shape and mold the people (of this larger community) into followers of the One who is both our Savior and our Lord.

I want to do a number of things during this time we have to lift up what God has been doing in our midst over the past several months. There's a lot today for us to celebrate. I also want to give time to a few of our (church family members) who are here today to share a bit about what has been happening in their own lives as they have made deeper commitments to their relationship with God and to sharing in that relationship with others in the context of Christian community. Then I want to close it out today by lifting up some of the reasons we have to celebrate as we look forward to what will be happening in the fall. There's a lot in the works that's worth celebrating.

Let me call us back (for a just a moment) to a few of the things that are central to what we are doing and praying for God to accomplish. We lifted these up these statements a few months back, but they're worth mentioning again to refresh our memories. We have an identity statement. It provides a good description of who we are:

“We are... a faith community  
committed to worshipping God  
and working through the power of the Holy Spirit  
to transform people  
into disciples of Jesus Christ.”

That's our identity. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God is changing lives, including not only those who come here for the first time, but those of us who have been here for a long time. We are all being changed. (It never stops.) It's a lifelong process for all of us. As a result, while we're here (and while that's happening), we worship and we witness to the God who has the power to change lives (inside and outside of this community) for the sake and purpose of Christ.

We also have a mission statement, a statement of what we are about, because we are not here only for ourselves, but we're here (to be about) what matters most in the heart of God.

“Our mission is to  
equip and empower people  
to have an eternal impact in the lives of others,  
locally and globally,  
for the Lord Jesus Christ.”

That's our mission. That's why we're here and what we're to be doing. Our mission is to become an equipped and empowered people who (by the power of God's Spirit) have the ability to impact the lives of (other people), here and around the world, all the way into eternity, for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Wrap your mind around what that means and the significance of (what we're doing) and see if it doesn't lead you into a spirit of celebration. There is no greater mission in this world than the one God has entrusted to us in his Son. And there is no other agent (or agency) in this world that will ever take that task and move it forward, apart from the body of believers God has brought together in his Church.

We are the people God has chosen for this mission and we are the ones through whom God has promised to work. If we forget our identity, then we'll fail in our mission. If we fail in our mission, then God will still carry out his work. The Church of Jesus Christ will never die. But as we remember our identity and commit ourselves to the mission we have been given, (God promises) that his kingdom will grow (in and among and through us) to the glory of Jesus Christ. It's mind-boggling to think about the scope and impact of what we're doing.

We also have a vision.

“Our Vision is to...  
Know the Father,  
Grow as Disciples of Jesus, and  
Go with the Spirit”

Say it with me. Our Vision is to “Know the Father, Grow as disciples of Jesus, and Go with the Spirit.” It's not hard to follow and it's easy to remember. Know, Grow, and Go...Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...Knowing the Father, Growing as disciples of Jesus, and Going with the Spirit.

That vision is already being used in some very creative ways, by our staff and our elected leaders, to shape what we're planning in the months ahead. I'll say more about that in a few moments.

Before inviting a few of our members to share what's been happening in their lives (and getting into some of the ministries) within our own congregation, let me highlight some of things that are happening as an extension of our ministry and some of the reasons we have to celebrate today.

Let's start with Operation Christmas Child. As you know, we've been packing and sending shoeboxes for the past 14 years. Last year alone, we sent out more than 500 to various parts of the world. The reason for celebration is not (so much) the number of boxes sent, but the impact those boxes have had on the receiving end.

Since sending them out (in this year alone), we've received back stories of how doors have opened for the gospel in Namibia, the Philippines, and (I quote) “in some of the hard to reach areas of the world” where (even in their communication to us), they cannot tell us where they've been sent, because it's so closed off. But they do tell us that where they have been sent is to (places and to people) who would otherwise never have been able to hear of the love of God for them in Jesus Christ. I get goosebumps just thinking about how those shoeboxes have literally changed lives for God's kingdom. We may never know...but God knows.

Let's move on to the Korean Church; we've been able to support their ministry (for the past five years), here on our campus, as a growing number of Korean-speaking families have moved into Almaden valley. Since coming here, they have grown from 75 people in worship each week to something just shy of 200 every Sunday. They have now reached a point where we can no longer continue to provide the space they need to keep growing, so they will be moving to a new location during the summer and opening up (for us) opportunities to use our Carter facility in new ways. On both fronts, there's reason to celebrate.

Keep moving, our quilting group, and we don't have exact records for this ministry; (it's somewhat under the radar), they've been making quilts for going on 40 years and have made (and given away), by our best estimates, more than 4,000 quilts. (That's a lot of quilts!) Just think of the impact and the love that represents.

Go on our Mexico Mission Team, we've been sending people into Tijuana (to build homes) for the past 9 years and have built (during those years) 39 homes for families in need, along with helping to build a major Youth Center (for a good part of that community). Without exception, those homes (and center) have provided a witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ, and have been used to draw hundreds of lives closer to him.

Moving on, our Walk for Water efforts have been happening for three years and (in those three years) more than \$320,000 has been raised to provide more than 25,000 of God's children with safe and clean water.

(It's been life-changing!) And it has all been done in the name of the one who is the Living Water, our Lord Jesus Christ.

And last (but certainly not least), through our School, (here at the church), we're soon to be finishing our 37<sup>th</sup> year of Christian education, currently with an enrollment of 136 children, and collectively (over those 37 years) of 4,165 kids whose lives have been shaped and molded into the image of Christ. Those children and their families, only God knows how far and how wide that impact has carried for his kingdom.

Now, that's only a partial list. I didn't mention City Team, Mount Cross, our Prison Ministry, the missionaries we support, to say nothing about the transformation taking place in our own congregation through Bible classes, children and youth ministries, Vacation Bible School, Sunday school, Senior's ministry, and on and on it goes.

Our Vision is to keep on working, not only as a community together (in the ways just described) in the greater mission field of the world, but also (and maybe even more importantly) in our own faith community (right here) in this valley, in one of the greatest missions fields of the world, in the lives of individuals, where one-on-one discipling can take place.

With that goal in mind, that we Know, Grow, and Go, I'd like to invite three of our members to share what's been happening in their lives: Michelle Donaldson, Linda Suda, and John Castro.

## Testimonies

Michelle and Linda and John, thanks for sharing your testimonies. It's encouraging to hear what's been happening as you've committed yourselves to some of the basic disciplines of the Christian life and as you've taken (more seriously) the importance of being challenged and encouraged in the context of Christian community.

For those very reasons, we're going to be moving forward as a congregation (through the summer and into the fall) and beyond, with a greater emphasis than ever before on gathering together in community; (in a large community) on Sundays, and in (smaller communities) throughout the week.

Around those two pillars, (worshiping together on Sunday and gathering together midweek) we're going to be moving our discipling efforts to a new level, and (in the process) opening the doors as wide as we possibly can to involve not only all of our members, but also (in a very deliberate way) as a way of reaching out into the community around us.

This isn't a matter of simply moving around the things we've been doing in the past, hoping for a different result. No, it's a new strategy and approach, consistent with our calling to make disciples and fully aligned with our Vision to "Know, Grow, and Go."

Very quickly, I'll mention just a few things that are going to be happening in the months ahead, keeping in mind the goal of gathering (as a large community) on Sundays and gathering (in smaller communities) throughout the week.

- On Sunday mornings, (let's start with that), we're going to be continuing with the same two-service schedule as we have today (and as we will have throughout the summer), as we move into the fall: two services at 9:00 and 10:45, gathering together as a large community.
- Also, on Sunday mornings, we're going to be kicking off (starting in September) what we'll be calling "Family First", where (on the first Sunday of each month), instead of having our kids in Sunday school (only with other kids), we'll all be together as one big family in worship, celebrating what God has done for us in his Son...the first Sunday of each month.
- In September, also, (using the language from our Vision), we're going to be starting "Grow Groups", midweek opportunities for all of us to be encouraged and challenged to grow in our faith. Be watching (in August), when it starts rolling out, for ways to connect.
- That same emphasis (for Sunday morning and midweek) will be carried forward in our Junior and Senior High ministries (as well), with new opportunities in each of those age groups starting this summer.
- The one area, before making any changes, where we want (and need your input), has to do with how we come at our Children's ministry on Sunday mornings. (There are a number of options.) This next

week we'll be sending out a survey to all parents and families with children in the preschool through elementary years. Be watching for that survey and send it back to us as soon as you can. We really want (and need) your input.

Now, I've only mentioned just a few of the "big picture" pieces we're putting in place to move our ministry forward. This next month's newsletter (coming out later this week) is dedicated to sharing more of the detail and rationale for the things I've just mentioned. As you receive it (and read it), know that your staff and elected leaders have put in long hours discussing and praying and sorting through many options, before coming to the conclusions and recommendations we have to help us grow spiritually and numerically.

Across the board, we believe these two foundational pillars for our shared life - worshipping as a large community on Sundays and gathering in smaller communities throughout the week - will provide the framework for all of us to become more fully equipped to "Know the Father, Grow as disciples of Jesus, and Go with the Spirit" into the world.

Let me close (today) with one last thought and a bit of a challenge. As I think about why we're here and what God has called us to do, two things come to mind. One, we're here to stay connected to Jesus. Our calling is to encourage and support and lift up (this community of believers), who each one (within it) has come to know the promise and the hope and the love God has for us in his Son. We're here to stay connected to Jesus and grow together in our faith.

We're also here because there's a world (out there) that doesn't know how much they are loved and why Jesus (as God's Son) would have been willing (as he was) to give his life so that they might have theirs. Our calling is to tell that story and to be a light to a world that is living in darkness, and doesn't even know it.

And so, as you leave today, a reminder to be watching for the June newsletter (and to read it), for parents to watch for that Children's ministry survey and to (fill it out), and for all of us, an encouragement to pick up (on your way out) one of those wristbands (Pastor Judy mentioned) and to wear it when it seems fit.

I'll be honest. I'm not a wristband kind of guy. (I'm really not.) But I started wearing one this past week, and since then, two things have happened.

One, it has served as a daily reminder that I belong to a faith community that has been called and chosen for a specific mission in this world. (Our Vision is etched into it.) It says "Know the Father, Grow as Disciples of Jesus, Go with the Spirit." Every day I'm reminded of who I am and what God wants for my life.

And two, on three separate occasions (in just this first week) I've been asked by someone else, why I'm wearing a wristband. Do you what that's done? It's started a conversation...about the church, about our faith, and about the love God has for his world. On three separate occasions, all I had to say is exactly what I just said. It comes from my church. It reminds me of my faith. We're doing some great things to have an impact in the world, and I'd love for you to join us.

We're not very good at that. We really aren't. But we need to be. It's a simple thing. Don't make it too hard. This wristband is one way that might help.

And there's even a bonus. It glows in the dark. Isn't that cool! Know, Grow, Go, and Glow! If you think about it, that's what it's all about! Amen.