

“State of the Church Address: Re-Casting Our Vision”

Dear friends, greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus.

For any business or organization to be successful, it has to have a vision. A vision gives direction, sets priorities, helps to establish goals. With a vision, organizations move forward, businesses stay on track. Without one, they fumble and they falter and given enough time they eventually fail.

Now, as we all know, (and we've said many times before), the church is not a business. It's a body. It's not an organization, but a living organism through which God has chosen to work. But as it is with any business or organization that hopes to grow and succeed, so it is in the church. Congregations need a vision. They need to have something against which they can measure their progress and toward which they can plan and direct their work.

Now, thankfully, in the Church, we're not on our own in trying to figure out what we're to do. In the Bible, it's clear. We are to love God, love one another, follow Jesus, and work together to make disciples. That's our mission. Those are the things we're to be doing. And they'll never change. Until the day Jesus returns, that's what we're to be about.

But a vision is not the same as a mission. A congregation's vision is based not upon the calling and commands of Jesus, but rather upon the context and opportunities and challenges that are specific to its particular time and history and place.

Back in 2007, we adopted a vision that we have been using ever since. We've called it our "2020 Vision." It's the clearest vision we have (20/20) of where we believe God is leading us as we move toward the year 2020. We've used it as a guide for setting priorities, making decisions, and figuring out what to do next.

But unlike our mission, which never changes, our vision is something that needs to change. It's contextual. It's based on what's happening, what's possible, and where it is, at the time, God is leading.

If you turn back the clock on our history, there have been a number of times when this congregation had a vision. There was a vision in 1962 when it first began. It was a mission start. This was a new and developing area. Almaden didn't even exist; but there was projection for growth. And so the vision set a direction, established priorities and goals, toward which those first members began to work.

And then as you follow the course of our more than 50 years of history, there have been a number of times when this congregation was at a crossroads and needed to make decisions and set new directions.

Did you know there have been ten different building programs over the years? Every one of those was tied to a vision. We've had a School here for thirty-five years. It wouldn't have happened if there wasn't a vision behind it. Twenty years ago, this congregation was in decline. It was a vision that helped turn it around. And what about the property purchase at Carter and the new Youth House? It's the same thing. Those things would not have happened without a vision.

Now, I'm not ready to throw out our 2020 Vision and write a new one. I don't believe that needs to happen. What I do believe needs to happen is that we re-cast our vision; throw it out there again in light of what is happening and where we believe God is leading.

Turn back the clock to the year 2009 and it's the time when what we were doing and where we were headed began to change. I still remember some of the conversations with our Church Council. It was a relaxed setting. There wasn't (in any way) a sense of panic. We were committed, we were confident, we were optimistic about where things were at. We were also open and honest and (not afraid of addressing) whatever questions or concerns we had.

I remember starting the conversation by simply sharing that the things that had worked so well in the past were no longer working in the same way. We were still a strong congregation. We were still receiving new members. We had a good school. We were financially in a good place. In spite of the nationwide trend among Protestant churches, for the most part, we had avoided the denominational decline. Nonetheless, it was time to take a step back and ask ourselves what, if anything, needed to change.

That was the beginning of what has now been a nearly six-year journey to get us to where we are today. The very next year, (after those initial conversations), four of us (from our staff) attended the first of four discipleship training sessions. We weren't exactly sure where that would lead us, only that we had become convinced it was where God was leading us.

Two years later, in 2012, we began our first leadership huddle. In 2013, we launched a second generation of huddles. Last year we added some much-needed discipleship staffing. And now, as we move into 2015, our third generation of huddles are being formed, we just (two weeks ago) began our first missional community, and we're bringing a proposal to our congregational meeting (later today) to change our leadership structure to better meet some of the challenges and opportunities we now face.

Add to those things, the changes we've made in our programming, the things we're putting in front of our kids (in Sunday school), and what's now going on among our young people, as our Junior and Senior-high youth are challenging themselves to intentionally become more active and better-equipped followers of Jesus, and it's not hard to conclude that what happened six years ago in those early conversations is now beginning to bear fruit in some significant and substantive ways, and we're only on the front end.

What I want to do this morning (on this weekend of our Annual Meeting) is to touch on a few of things we have going on, some of the challenges we face, and what it might look like if we were to re-cast our vision based upon where (we believe) God is leading.

Let's start with the new leadership structure. Without getting into the detail, (you'll hear more of the specifics this afternoon), it's a proposal that not only streamlines the work we're doing, but also makes a more efficient and effective use of our leader's time and energies and gifts.

What it does (among other things) is it puts into place a more intentional and direct approach to what we are actually intending to accomplish. The emphasis in the new structure is along the lines of "base" and "front." (We've used that language before.) The base is what's happening on-site, the things we do here at church. The front is what's happening off-site, away from the church, in other places.

Now, the lines aren't always that neat and clean. There's almost always some overlap between the two. But the intention (in the new structure) is clear. Why we're here is not just for those (of us) who are here. We're here (in large part) for those who are not here. That's why we exist.

There's a base, where we gather. We worship, we pray, we challenge each other to grow. There's also a front, a world out there that needs Jesus as much as we do.

In our new structure, there's a much more deliberate and intentional focusing (of our energies) on the front. We're not setting aside the base. We'll keep doing what we're doing. But we're going after the front with a new and, what we hope will become, a more fruitful approach.

We're also putting in place (in this leadership proposal) a very concrete spiritual component that (prior to this) has never been in place. Now, that's not to say that our prior leaders weren't spiritual, or that they didn't care about our spiritual well-being. (Of course they did, and they were.) But there was never a direct responsibility spelled out for what that meant. In this proposal, it's spelled out. It's placing on our leadership (and not just on our pastors) a concern and a responsibility for the overall spiritual health of this congregation.

Now, I'm not exactly sure what that will mean, how it will play out. (We'll be trying different things.) But as we make this transition from being program-driven to becoming disciple-producing, it's an element in our shared life that we can no longer assume or neglect. Our vision needs to take-on this spiritual element in new ways. The first way is to place that responsibility for spiritual care on our leaders. I'm (very much) supportive of the new proposed structure.

I'm also excited about what's being considered in our campus master plan. Our Strategic Planning Team is leading that effort. (We're targeting 2017.) For now, it's just some ideas. Nothing is final. Before anything is final, it'll need support not only from our leaders, but from the congregational, as well. There'll be plenty of opportunity (as it moves forward) for all of us to weigh-in on whatever ends up being proposed.

What's being considered (at this time), and not yet proposed, is a number of things. We're looking at the possibility of partnering with one of the local ministries to see if there's something we could do here on-site to support what they're doing. Most likely, something with City Team, since their emphasis is Christ-centered and disciple-producing, just like ours. We're not sure, at this point, if there's anything there. If there is, then we'll look at what it might mean and go from there.

We're also looking at a more long-term approach to supporting another church, much like we're now doing with the Korean ministry. Their target audience is different than ours. They're reaching people we never will. We're talking about what that might mean (for our facilities) if we were to take a more long-term approach to that same commitment, whether it's with them or someone else. At this point, we're not sure.

We're also considering some of our own needs: classrooms, offices, nursery care, more meeting space. (It's all on the table.) In the same way, so is our school, both short-term and long-term. In fact, we're looking at the possibility of an expansion (of our school) in two directions.

One, in the direction of infant care, starting early in life, since many of the families in this area, in order to live in this area, need both parents to work. We're not sure what that will look like, but we're looking at the possibility and assessing the need.

The other is the possibility of expanding our school to include a middle school. Now, I know we've talked about this before. We've even done a bit of exploring to find out what's possible. What we haven't done, and what we're now doing, is to engage a company that does this very thing to help us out.

Last month our leadership engaged a group called "Paideia", a Christian organization that works with schools (like ours), as well as new starts, to find out what's possible. Beginning in the next few weeks, they'll be conducting a feasibility study, trying to help us find out if the idea makes any sense. They'll be doing interviews, looking at numbers, analyzing the demographics and needs. By the end of March, we hope to have some concrete information (from that study) and, perhaps, even a recommendation as to what's feasible.

Now, before you start getting all excited (or worked up), I want you to know that none of us, including Pastor Judy and I, know where this will lead, let alone what we even think about the possibility. There are many things to consider. If it turns out (from the study) that it's feasible, then we'll take a closer look. If it's not, then it's not and we won't. As with everything else being considered, before this goes anywhere, we'll all have a chance to take a look.

The last thing I'll mention in this master plan is the idea of doing something we've never done before that will support what we're now doing. One of the more creative ideas is the possibility of building a coffee shop (out front) that would give our church and campus (at least to the community) a new identity and look. It would be a place for huddles and missional communities to meet. It would be an easy entrance for outsiders to find out more about who we are. And it would most certainly push our outreach in ways it's never been pushed before, giving even more emphasis to what we're doing on the front.

Now, what's finally recommended will be presented, most likely, sometime later this year. There will be no surprises when the time comes. When it comes, it'll all be clear and laid out. For now, (until it's clear) and laid out, I ask you to be praying for our leaders as they look at these (and many other) possibilities for our master plan. The things we're considering (and why) are all related to where we believe God is leading.

Three other things I want to mention, (before closing), that tie in with what we're doing as we re-cast our vision. The first is what's happening with our first missional community. We started (two weeks ago), as I mentioned, what we're calling a "Pilot effort." By design, it's intended to be exactly what its title says. It's a pilot. It's our first shot at this idea. We have about 20 of our already-huddled leaders taking part. In the next six months, we'll be trying different things, a bit of experimenting, in an attempt to put together a template for future efforts.

Our hope is to have at least three, if not four or more missional communities starting in the fall. (At that point, it'll be open to anyone and to everyone.) A missional community, just like a pilot, is what its name says. It's missional. It reaches beyond itself. It has a specific target and (perhaps even) need in mind. It serves others. It shares the faith. It does it not only in words, but in deeds. (It's missional.)

It's also a community. It meets together on a regular basis. It shares meals. It shares prayer. It's designed to support and encourage and challenge those involved in their own discipleship walk. I'm prayerfully optimistic about what this missional community direction will mean for our shared life. I'd ask for you to be in prayer as well.

The second is the possibility of starting a house church; maybe even two. (We've mentioned this before.) Every study I've seen says the same thing. This next generation coming up is spiritual. It's asking the tough questions; trying to figure it out. What's being left out is the church. What's not figured in is a commitment to come to a place like this.

Now we could argue all day about who's right and who's wrong. I'd argue that we all need the church, not as an institution, but as a body. We need each other. Christ wants us together. I'd argue that case.

What I won't argue, and that's what house churches are all about, is that (whatever the case), we need to do something to reach (not only) the next generation, but every generation.

There's not one of us (here today) who doesn't know someone in our own age-group that's either not going or has been turned off by the church. Again, right or wrong, it doesn't matter. What matters is that we figure it out and we put into place and we find a way for people to find their way.

Now, this isn't our first priority as of today, but it's near the top. Before the year is over, I want us to take a shot. Maybe two. Maybe three. We'll leave that to the Spirit. What we won't leave to the Spirit is our response. We know the need. (The Spirit is clear.) We're fully aware of the challenge. We need to find a way to make it happen. Let's make it happen.

The third is something I'm looking forward to; we're hoping to start next month. We're calling it "Dinner for Six." It's a way of inviting people into our homes with the goal of simply getting to know our church family better than we now do.

Now, I'm not going to go into all of the details. Some have told me that this "Dinner for Six" idea sounds like a dating service, a way of matching up anyone who wants to be matched up. Let me assure you, that's not what we have in mind. Don't even go there.

But if you want to go there, this "Dinner for Six", and you like the idea, want to be one of the hosts, let me know. We need about a dozen or so to step up, if we're going to pull it off as we have it planned. Let me know if you're interested and I'll share more.

In closing today, (as I said) I'm not ready to throw out the vision we now have. What we have is a good one. It has served (and continues to serve) us well. But we're re-casting our vision. We're putting it in a new light, in light of what God is doing that is new.

So let me throw this out; not as a new vision, but as a re-casting of our vision. How about this? Instead of a 20/20 Vision, how about an Acts 20:20 vision?

From our second lesson today, Paul is talking about his ministry. He talks about his suffering, about his calling, about his desire to finish the race and complete the task.

Do you remember what he says in verse twenty? Do you remember what he says about how it has all happened, how God has worked to carry out his work?

Here's what he says, (from Acts 20, verse 20): He says, "You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything to you that would be helpful, (and now listen), but I have taught you publicly and from house to house." I have taught you publicly and from house to house.

How about that as a re-casting of our vision? Just think about it. Base and front, Huddles and Missional Communities, partnering ministries, an expansion of our school, house churches, dinner for six? We're not going to stop what we're doing, but we're not going to leave it where it is.

Call it what you want. Here at the church and out there in the world. It doesn't matter where and how it happens. What matters is that it happens. What matters is how we respond.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the vision you've given us here in this place, and for the place we have in your vision for the world. As we continue to seek your guidance and as we consider the part we're to play, help us play our part well, that what we do would glorify Jesus, draw people to him, and expand your kingdom...in his name we pray. Amen.