

Unpacking our 'Mission Statement'

"Where there is no vision, the people perish..." Proverbs 29:18a - KJV

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Rev. Todd B. Freeman

College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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If I were to come up with just one phrase to partially explain the effectiveness of this congregation's ministry over its nearly 102 years of existence it would be **dedication to its vision and mission**. It's a fact that some churches just seem to have a stronger guiding vision than others. And those congregations whose ministry has the greatest impact on the lives of its members and its community are those with a solid and clear vision of:

- who they are
- what they hope to accomplish
- where they believe God is leading them into the future

The author of the wisdom literature found in the book of Proverbs states in 29:18a, "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (KJV). Given that, I'd like to further explore this concept of vision and mission, especially in the context of this congregation. First, it's important to note that the Hebrew word used for "vision" in the context of this Old Testament passage refers *not* to the vision or foresight of the people, but rather to the vision that God has for the people. Another way to say this is that it's not the vision of the people, per se, that keeps them from perishing, but rather the vision given to the people by God.

Our task, then, as a community of faith, is to try to discern God's vision for us in the context of our own time and place. This is a continually ongoing task, and it involves constant reflection and openness to change and adaptation, which is something else this congregation has done quite effectively over the years. When it comes to seeking God's vision for the church, Presbyterians have a long-standing tradition of believing that God speaks primarily not just to select individuals. **Discernment, then, is best done with a group of people dedicated to trying to listen to where God is leading.** This is perhaps the most important task of a congregation's Session, which is comprised of elected leaders, which we now call Ruling Elders, and the pastor, who is now designated in our denomination as a Teaching Elder.

Three years ago, when we were about a year away from celebrating our 100th Anniversary as a congregation, we formed a Visioning Ministry Team that conducted and then implemented a study that was based on the input of the entire congregation. The information collected brought very helpful guidance to many areas of our ministry, and was based primarily on the strengths that this congregation already possessed. **But a church cannot survive and thrive on mere vision alone. Rather, it requires its leaders and all its members to take the subsequent action that is necessary to carry out that vision – to turn vision into reality.** That is why each of you, as church members, must recognize that you have an important part to play in contributing to our ministry efforts.

A week ago Saturday, the **Session** of this church gathered for our annual retreat, which was held at my home. It turned out to be one of the more meaningful retreats I've attended. The primary reason that was so is because of **the remarkable trust that we have developed with each other, especially as exhibited in our ability to be open, honest, and even vulnerable with each other.** We were able to share with one another not only our opinions, insight and wisdom, but also our faith and our feelings – something that doesn't always come naturally for most Presbyterians.

As in previous years, during the retreat we looked at a list of twelve areas that The Alban Institute has determined are **"Marks of a Healthy Congregation."** Some of those involve the following:

- Enriched, not imprisoned by its past.
- Able to face and deal constructively with conflict.
- Actively engaged in addressing the issues and problems of its community and its denomination.
- Experiencing a positive dynamic between pastor and people.
- Committed to growth, realizing that growth brings change.
- A wise steward of its resources.
- And, not surprisingly: Committed to a shared vision from which it prioritizes and uses its energies and resources.

After looking at these and the others, we felt that overall the church is doing quite well in all of these areas. But there is another mark of a healthy congregation that I want to mention specifically this morning is this: **Developing the "corporate soul" of the congregation as well as individual souls.** More specifically, it defines this by **how well a congregation pays attention to its corporate culture, ethos, climate, morale, and behavior in order to become the kind of community that empowers its members?**

While I was previously familiar with the term "corporate soul," I wanted to learn about a bit more about it, so I googled that term and found an article that defines it in the context of the business world. (Rediscovering the Corporate Soul, by William Seidman, Ph.D., and Michael McCauley; ©2003 Cerebyte, Inc.) Those of you who work for a company may want to apply this information to your own work setting. It begins:

Some organizations constantly show passion, commitment and the ability to achieve sustained success. These organizations have a 'soulful' quality about them; there is a feel or a buzz that is noticeable and memorable.

I think that statement can be applied to churches as well. And I believe that College Hill is doing a very good job of living into that definition.

Reviewing these "Marks of a Healthy Congregation" at the Session Retreat was a very helpful exercise. But we had another conversation that was perhaps even more meaningful. Each year I make sure that we take a look at our congregation's **Mission Statement.** A good mission statement, and this applies to companies as well as to congregations, should be fairly succinct and to the point, and it should be reviewed regularly to see if it still **properly reflects the overall mission and identity of that organization.**

Most churches, unfortunately, have a very bland and generic statement in that it could apply to basically any congregation, regardless of where it finds itself on the

theological and social spectrum. When that happens, mission statements are rarely even looked at, let alone used as a tool to guide and discern the ministry efforts of the church. That, I'm pleased to say, is not the case here at College Hill. In fact, our *Mission Statement* is printed in our worship bulletin each and every Sunday, in our monthly eNewsletter, and in most all the mass church emails that I send out. There are three bullet points to our **Mission Statement**, and they include:

- **Build an inclusive community of faith.**
- **Receive and openly share the love of God.**
- **Reach out with a compassionate voice for peace and justice.**

In previous Session Retreats it took only a couple minutes at the most for us to review our Mission Statement before agreeing that it still fits and then moving on to other matters at hand. But last week something different happened. We took the time, over a half and hour in fact, to thoroughly **look at and explore the meaning of each and every word and phrase in order to unpack and gain a deeper understanding of why we have stated what we have, and what we think it means.**

We made note of the importance of each of the verbs: build, receive, share, reach out. The following is a brief review of some of our discussion, for I think it merits mention in the context of a sermon.

The first of our three bullet points, again, is: **“Build an inclusive community of faith.”** The verb 'build' indicates that this is something that doesn't just magically happen on its own, but rather something that we must work hard at in order to achieve. We then shared our own understandings of the word '**inclusive.**' Comments were made such as, “accepting others,” “building diversity,” “agreeing to disagree,” and “looking honestly at where we are and are not” in terms of just *how inclusive* we really are. It was helpful in that we were able to recognize that **as a congregation we cannot be all things to all people**, that in reality some folks may not be comfortable with any number of things, such as our style of worship, or our decidedly progressive theological perspective. So while it's important that we accept other people wherever they find themselves in their own journey of faith, we also are not afraid to acknowledge our own identity as a congregation, one with a particular mission and vision. **Therefore, while all may be welcome, not all may feel this is where they belong. And I think we need to give ourselves permission to say, that's okay.**

We then reflected on the use of the term **“community,”** as opposed to the word “family.” That was a long and helpful discussion, that I will be pleased to engage you in conversation at another time, if you would like. We then emphasized the kind of community that we are, in that we are a *“community of faith.”*

The second bullet point is: **“Receive and openly share the love of God.”** Any congregation knows that they are called to share the love of God with others. So why and how is our statement different? We discussed how that couldn't really happen until we first recognize that we are indeed recipients of God's love. In other words, **we cannot share the love of God if we haven't realized that we have already received the love of God.**

We also had a long discussion about the use of the word **“openly,”** in the phrase “openly share the love of God.” There's almost an evangelism challenge that involves courage, even bravely, in our call to share openly. But **the word “share” also indicates an approach that is not overly aggressive, coercive or manipulative.** Perhaps it even

suggests an element of vulnerability that comes with openly sharing with others, especially with those who really need to hear and experience the love of God.

Next, of all the things that could be said about the nature and character of God, note that our *Mission Statement* intentionally emphasizes the **love of God**. That, in and of itself, also points to **the ability to have a relationship with God, that God isn't just "out there" somewhere, but is also present with and within us.**

The final bullet point states, **"Reach out with a compassionate voice for peace and justice."** **How would you unpack that statement?** "Reach out" itself implies action. And it was mentioned that you cannot reach out to another with a clenched fist, but rather must do so with an open hand.

Looking at the phrase **"peace and justice,"** one that we have heard and used for years, we recognized it as a long-standing focus of this congregation, with its **emphasis on equal rights and fairness for all.** This phrase also indicates a particular approach to ministry that involves **advocacy,** and even the element of being an **activist.** We found this is nicely balanced, however, with the use of the word **"compassionate."** **For we are all aware that not all advocated of peace and justice do so compassionately.** Compassion, therefore, must be involved in our approach to others, especially in the issues that we hold dear to our hearts, and of which we know others are not in agreement. Therefore, our *Mission Statement* recognizes the **tension that is inherently involved between the focus and the approach to our mission and ministry work.**

And the word **"voice"** is also meaningful. It implies more than just the words we speak, however. We recognize that it is something that we *work for,* especially in relation to speaking out for those who often go unheard.

So in the end, after all this in-depth discussion and insight at our Session Retreat as to why our *Mission Statement* declares what does, including having conversations about how we might want to change certain words here and there, what do you supposed we did? **We unanimously decided to keep our *Mission Statement* just as it is currently written, without edit. But as I hope you can see, it wasn't a wasted exercise, but rather one that gave the Session, and I hope you as well, a much clearer understanding of our mission, and the vision that we have discerned vision for College Hill.**

Working together, it is our dedication to this mission and vision that is keeping this congregation, by God's grace, both healthy, effective and relevant. Working with such a thoughtful Session, and a caring congregation, I couldn't be more hopeful about our year ahead together.

Amen.