

“A Family on Mission”
Sermon Series on *First Pres at the Core*
Dr. Peter B. Barnes
September 13, 2015
(Mt. 28:16-20)

Introduction.

When I was in the second grade, my mother took me to see an optometrist. My teacher told her she thought I was having trouble seeing the blackboard, and she suggested my mother have my eyes checked. (Yes, they had blackboards back in the Dark Ages when I was growing up in school.) The optometrist dilated my eyes, put me in a dark room, and had me sit in a chair while he positioned a funny contraption in front of my face which had all these different lenses he could switch out in order to check my vision.

The doctor asked me to read a particular row of letters and see if I could make them out. Then we progressed down the rows until I couldn't read the letters anymore. You know the drill. We didn't get very far before he had to start using those fancy lenses to help me see the letters. When all was said and done, the doctor told my mother I was extremely near sighted and I needed glasses.

We went to the Walter Ballard Optical Company in downtown Atlanta where a technician fitted me with a new set of glasses. I remember coming home with my new lenses, and the thing I remember most was how I could now see that the trees actually had individual leaves on them. Before then, with my bad vision I thought that trees were just a bunch of green, and it blew me away to see each leaf with its own individual design. I began to think about all I had been missing before I had good vision. (I also thought I looked pretty spiffy in my new glasses!)

It's amazing what good vision can do for a person. When you can't see things clearly, life is a blur and you have a hard time finding your way, even when the path is right in front of you. Without good vision it's easy to get off course and even bump into things, and you need to see clearly if you want to get where you're supposed to go.

That's true with physical vision, but it's also true with the vision of any organization. Recently the Session of our church has been in the process of adopting a new vision for First Pres. It's a five-year Strategic Plan that includes a new Mission Statement, a set of Core Values, and a list of Strategic Priorities and Initiatives which will guide our church for the next five years. The plan will take us to the year 2020, so we decided to do a little play on words and call it our “20/20 Vision: Seeing Our Future Clearly.” Pretty clever, don't you think?

For the next seven weeks, we're going to talk about the new Core Values of our church in this new Vision, and I'll also share with you today the new Mission Statement Session has approved. Later in the fall, elders of our church will make a special presentation at the Congregational Meeting which will be held on October 11th to share

with you the Strategic Priorities and Initiatives they are considering and will approve later this month. So stay tuned for that.

This is an exciting time in the life of our church, and I hope you'll join me every Sunday as we learn about the new 20/20 Vision. I believe Aslan is on the move at First Pres, and I'm excited about where God is leading us!

I. The Background to the Vision.



ECO is committed
to growing and planting
flourishing churches
that make disciples
of Jesus Christ.

In February 2014, the Session appointed a 12-member task force to begin work on developing a proposal for a new five-year strategic plan. The previous October our church voted

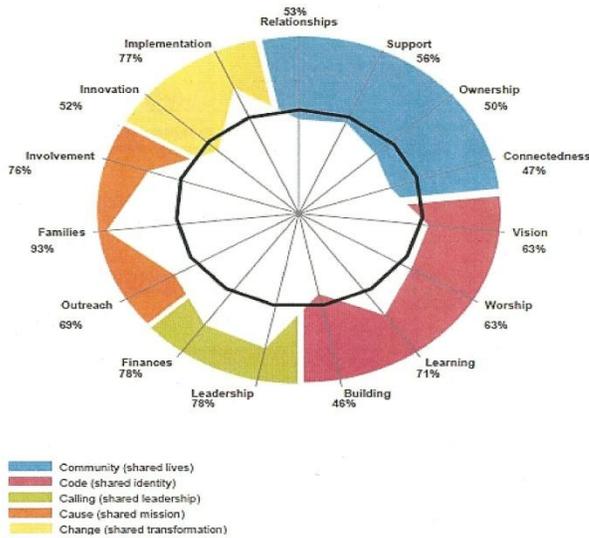
overwhelmingly to request that Salem Presbytery dismiss us from the PCUSA to ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians, and the elders felt like it was time to put the denominational discernment behind us and start looking to the future. Negotiations with the presbytery were underway to find a workable financial arrangement to be dismissed to ECO with our property, so the Session appointed this strategic planning team to begin this very important parallel work.

Over the course of the next year-and-a-half, this 12-person team, which grew to 13 when Heather Thomsen joined our staff, led the Session and the congregation through a number of exercises to try and discover of church's spiritual DNA. We also wanted to learn more about the demographics of Winston-Salem and how things had changed in recent years. In addition, the Session also contracted with The Armstrong Group and their lead consultant Kevin Ford to help lead us through this season of reflection and study.

We conducted a congregational survey, and we held focus groups in the church. The consultants led our staff through an exercise of self-discovery using the *Strengths Finder* assessment. We also reviewed an extensive report on the demographics of our city within a five mile radius of the church, and we read a number of books on the challenges of becoming a missional church in the 21st century. Finally, the Session took part in two strategic planning retreats which were facilitated by Kevin Ford, and we'll have a third retreat later this fall.

The 20/20 Vision team took all this collective work and put together a proposal which has now gone through multiple revisions and resulted in the Plan proposed to Session. Let me share with you some of the findings of our study.

II. The Findings of Our Study.



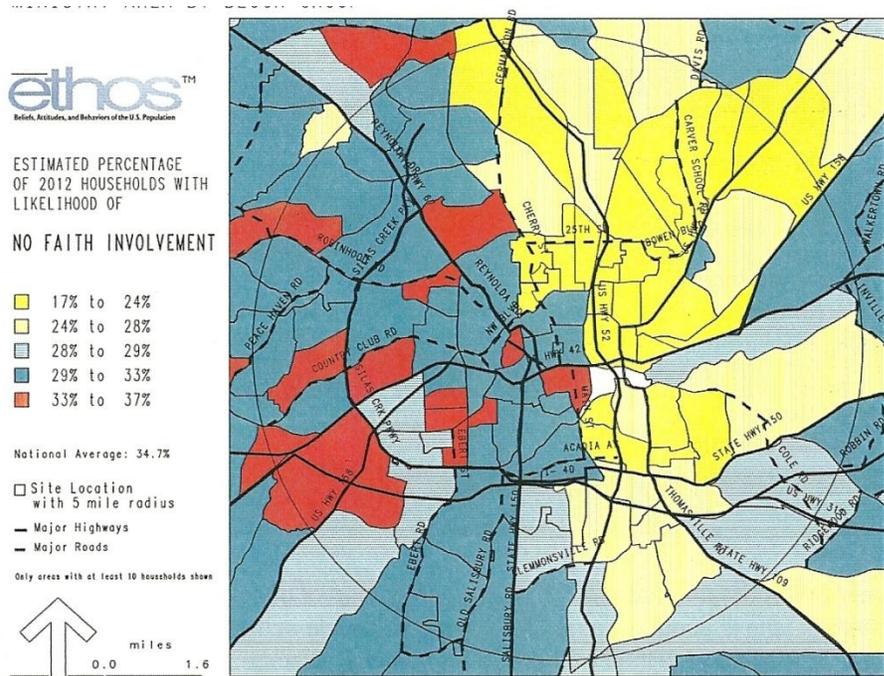
strong. But if the color is inside the black circle, it's not so good. That's where the church needs work.

The consultants told us that what the survey showed is that our church is generally very healthy, and we're strong in a number of ways such as our ministry to children, youth, and families. We're also strong in our staff and lay leadership, and in the financial support of our church. And we're strong in our worship, our missional outreach, and the personal involvement of our people.

However, the survey also revealed we've got some areas of weakness, and there are ways we need to improve. For example, many in our congregation say that it's not very easy to connect with others in our church family, and their experience of community isn't what they would like it to be. Our facilities need a good bit of work, and people would like to see us complete the plan to connect all the buildings together. And now that

we've completed our move to ECO, the congregation would like to see us develop a clear vision for where our church is headed in the future.

The demographic study of the five mile radius of our church was also revealing. We learned about the economic and ethnographic trends in our community, and the fact that there are



now 3,300 people who live in downtown, with more moving in every month. One of the fascinating things we discovered in this demographic study was that while people in east Winston-Salem are economically less well-off, they are spiritually rich. Look at all the yellow. People in the yellow zones are the folks in Winston-Salem who are the most involved with their faith. However, the study indicates that while people in the western part of our city are more well-off financially, they are the least involved with faith. Folks who live in the zip codes from which we draw most are economically wealthy but spiritual poor.

All these findings helped inform and shape the development of our new 20/20 vision.

III. The Mission We're On.

In light of these findings, what should our mission be? If you were to boil down to one sentence what we believe our church is supposed to accomplish, what would that mission statement be? Many of you have been part of groups that have had to develop a mission statement before. Maybe you even have your own personal mission statement. It's not an easy task, is it? It's hard to be brief and succinct and still say everything you think is important. But I believe our team and the Session did a pretty good job with this.

The new Mission Statement our Session adopted for First Pres is this: "Our mission is to invite all people to say 'yes!' to Jesus with their whole lives." Say it with me. It's a pretty good statement, don't you think? Look at all the elements of this statement.

The statement is *missional*. It takes into account the fact that the church is supposed to be outward-looking and should be focused not on itself but on others.

In addition, the statement is *invitational*. It says, "To invite all people..." There is power in a personal invitation, which requires relationship and takes initiative. How can you and I become more invitational when it comes to inviting people to consider a relationship with Christ?

The mission statement is also *positive*. It invites all people "to say 'yes!' to Jesus." It emphasizes what we are for, not what we're against. We want everyone to live in the affirmative when it comes to their spiritual journey of faith.

And the statement is *Christ-centered*. It's all about Jesus. It's about putting Christ at the center of our lives and making Him the Lord of everything.

Finally, the mission statement is *holistic*. We want people to say "yes!" to Jesus with their *whole* lives, not just part of them. Too many of us only give Jesus part of our lives, and there are still areas over which we haven't allowed Christ to take control.

The mission statement picks on the Great Commission that Jesus gave His disciples at the end of His earthly ministry before He was taken up to heaven. At the end of the book of Matthew in chapter 28 we read where Jesus gathered His disciples on a mountainside and said to them, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you, and lo I will be with you to the very end of the age.*"

Our new mission statement resonates with Jesus' Great Commission, and it's aligned with the call of Christ to take the Gospel to the whole world and make disciples of all

people everywhere. Notice the comprehensive and global nature of Jesus' commission. *"All authority...all the nations...everything I have commanded you."* When we experience transformation in our personal lives, it will begin to affect our community and the world around us in a comprehensive way.

The Great Commission is an invitation to join God in changing the world, and I believe you'll never find your deepest purpose or greatest joy in life until you discover your place in becoming a part of fulfilling this commission. When you ask yourself the questions of Why am I here? What is my purpose? and Where do I fit into God's larger story?, I believe the deepest answer to all these questions can only be found when you discover your unique role in fulfilling the missional calling of God. That's what this mission statement is about.

IV. The Values We Share.

I have here in my hand an onion and an apple. I like both foods, but for different reasons. There are few smells that pique my interest in food as much as onions sautéing in butter, and in the fall one of my favorite delights is eating a Honey Crisp apple.

The reason I show these to you is this. If you peel an onion, you can pull back the various layers of it until there is nothing left at all. Only the peelings of the onion remain, except for perhaps a stringent smell and maybe a few tears in your eyes! However, when you peel an apple, no matter how much you peel and cut away, eventually you arrive at a core. There is something solid there in the middle. When all is taken away, a core remains.

The final matter about which I want to talk with you this morning involves the new core values of First Pres. When all else is taken away, what are the essential commitments upon which our church is built? What are the bedrock values which drive our ministry and our mission?

The core values the Session has adopted are:

We are a spiritual family on mission to:

Encounter Jesus
Experience Grace
Grapple with Scripture
Serve our Neighbors and
Invest in the Future Church
all for the Glory of God!

Over the next seven weeks, we're going to unpack each of these five core values along with the tag line at the end of the statement in order to help us understand the essential commitments and values which are at the core of the spiritual DNA of First Presbyterian Church.

However, I want you to notice that at the very beginning of the statement is the affirmation that "we are a spiritual family on mission." This declaration resonates with the mission statement, and it builds upon it.

Last Wednesday, Amy Carlan was in charge of our staff devotions, and she led us through a time of reflection on our new mission statement and this first sentence in the

list of our core values. She broke us into four groups and assigned each group a different aspect of the statement to discuss. My group was the “mission” group, and the first question on the handout she distributed was, “What are some of your favorite mission stories or movies?”

Our group came alive with conversation, and everyone had a movie or story that quickly came to mind. One person mentioned the movie *Mission Impossible*, and the image of Tom Cruise holding onto the door of an airplane as it was taking off jumped into my head. Another person talked about the National Lampoon film *Vacation*, and we all laughed as we talked about the Griswold family trying to get to the amusement park Wally World and the adventure of their misfortunes along the way. Petey Crowder said his favorite story about a mission is *The Lord of the Rings*.

It’s one of my favorites, too. *The Lord of the Rings* is a wonderful story about a disparate group of people who unexpectedly find themselves on a common mission to take the ring of power and see to it that it is taken to Mount Doom and destroyed in the lake of fire from which it came. No one person can accomplish the task by himself. It takes a community, a family, if you will, and they commit themselves to one another and to the mission. Together they become the Fellowship of the Ring.

You and I in this church are like the Fellowship of the Ring, and God has given us a wonderful mission. And each of us has a part to play and a role to fill if we’re going to be successful in the task.

Conclusion.

One of my favorite people on our church staff is Robert Manning. His smile can light up a room, and he is one of the most spiritual people I know. During our staff devotions last Wednesday, Robert reflected on the new mission statement of our church, and he reminded us that saying “yes!” to Jesus is at the heart of a walk with Christ. He told the group, “There was a time when I said ‘no’ to the Lord. I wandered from Him. But then I changed, and I said, ‘Yes!’ And I have learned that saying ‘yes!’ involves a whole lot. I’ve learned that saying ‘yes!’ to Jesus means saying ‘no’ to the devil, and to everything else that wants to take the place of Christ in your life.” Robert concluded by adding, “I like this new statement the Session had adopted!” If Robert Manning thinks it’s a pretty good mission statement, that’s a pretty strong endorsement in my book!



I want to close this morning by having everyone repeat the statement again after me. And I want you to say it like you mean it! I’ll say a phrase, and then you repeat it after me.

“We are...a spiritual family on mission...to invite all people...to say yes to Jesus...with their whole lives!”

Now, that's a vision I can get excited about! It's even more exciting to me than getting new glasses for the first time and having the vision to see the individual leaves on a tree. That kind of vision can change the world! Amen.

