

Our Vision for Faith EFC

Early in 1985 Brenda and I sensed that God was calling me to be a pastor. We were working at a Christian camp in South Mississippi at the time. We decided that I needed some theological education, so we did some research on various seminaries around the country. We eventually decided to go to Trinity Evangelical Divinity School just north of Chicago. We loaded up almost all of our earthly possessions and headed north. It wasn't exactly like the Beverly Hillbillies, but sort of. An orange Ford Pinto pulling an orange U-Haul is a sight to behold.

When we got to Deerfield, Illinois we stayed with some friends of a friend for a couple weeks while we found housing. We discovered that sometimes an elderly person will allow seminary students to live in their house rent-free in exchange for some basic chores or simply for the companionship. We found just such a live-in situation and move into the third floor of Mrs. Hollingberry's mansion on the 9th hole of the Glencoe Country Club golf course.

We needed money, so went looking for employment. Brenda got a job at the seminary as the Personnel Director. My whole time at Trinity I was known as "Brenda's husband." I first got a job as a Security Guard, and later as a window-washer.

When I think back about it, I realize that we made some rather radical changes in lifestyle during those years. We moved to a different part of the country – away from family and friends, we adopted a rather Spartan lifestyle (as grad students everywhere understand), we put hobbies and other pursuits on hold. Basically we focused all our resources (money, time, energy) on me getting a theological education. It's not that we didn't do anything else; but we had a definite focus for those three years. And it paid off because I got a valuable education.

I tell you my story simply to illustrate that we as human beings have an amazing capacity to adapt and make lifestyle changes *if* we think it's worth it. Most of you could tell your own stories about how you've made near-heroic sacrifices because you thought it was worth it: pursuing an education or learning a trade, meeting some physical or emotional need of a family member, building a house, or even pursuing a relationship (people do all sorts of incredible things when they've "found the one" that they want to marry). My point is that we have a capacity to adapt and even make lifestyle changes *if* we think it's worth it.

This applies to individuals and families. But does it apply to larger groups of people such as to an entire church? Can a church actually adapt and make changes that it believes God wants it to make? Our conviction here at Faith is that by the grace of God we can adapt and change and become the church God wants us to become. When we see weaknesses in our ministry structures (e.g., it's hard for people to make new friends) or deficiencies in our character (e.g., a lack of compassion for the poor) or strengths that need to be broadened and deepened ("excel still more"), we believe that by the grace of God we do things differently. Just like an individual can make changes because s/he thinks it's worth it, a church can also make changes.

In 2008 our leadership spent a significant amount of time praying, talking, and dreaming about the type of church God might want us to become over the next 3 to 5 years. In effect we discussed the changes that we believe God wants us to make as a church. The fruit of this process was a Vision that identified five broad priorities for us as a congregation. These five areas aren't meant to be comprehensive in the sense of describing everything we do as a church;

rather, they are meant to express our priorities as a church during this particular time in history. We don't believe in changing just for the sake of changing; we believe in change that allows us to embody more fully biblical values. Even though change is hard for most people, it's often necessary in order to be everything God wants us to be.

As I did in October of 2008, I am going to try to paint a picture/vision of what this church might look like as we make progress in these five areas of our church life.

Our *mission* remains the same: helping people come to faith in Christ and experience God in all of life. As we live out this mission, we will pursue these priorities as a congregation:

A Culture of Welcome and Acceptance

We desire to welcome and accept fellow believers and non-believers—whatever their situation in life—and, more than just being friendly, actually cultivate true, growing friendships.

As you know, cultivating true, growing friendships is much more difficult than simply being friendly. We hope that we're friendly, but God calls us to something much deeper than that. A friendship is a voluntary, ongoing, caring relationship. You willingly spend time with your friends. You share your life with your friends.

In order to get to this point of developing deep, growing friendships, we need to be the type of people who intentionally welcome others into our lives. We should have a sense of stewardship for those who enter our midst – whether on Sunday mornings or at Alpha or any other gathering of the church. We have the mindset that those who enter our midst have been entrusted to us – if even for one Sunday – and therefore we have a responsibility to God to welcome and accept them wherever they are in their walk with God.

As you know, people show up at church in a variety of different conditions. Some people show up eager to meet people and eager to get involved. Others show up apprehensive about church and about God, but willing to give it a try. Some people show up in pretty desperate circumstances. Perhaps they haven't gone to church in many years but at one time they found strength through a church so they return. It's been pointed out that most people (in the Midwest anyway) aren't so much un-churched as de-churched; it's not that they were never part of a church.

Our responsibility is to meet people right where they are in their relationship with God and welcome them into our fellowship. This is a mindset of hospitality. This is something that we are asking each of you to "own." The longer you are here at Faith, the more fully we would like you to own this. This will require change for some of you; some of you aren't in the habit of reaching out to others on Sundays. But please understand that we aren't asking you to become somebody you aren't. Not everybody is an overbearing extrovert like me. I'm glad the church is comprised of extroverts and introverts and everything in between.

We're just asking you to notice other people and to reach out in whatever way is best for you. On the way to church, you could pray and invite God to lead you in this. Some of you might decide that you'll invite someone over for a meal; or maybe you invite them to be part of your Life Group; maybe you simply initiate a conversation with them that morning. But you notice people and you entertain the possibility that God wants to use you in their lives.

A Deepening of Prayer

We desire for every member to have a rich, growing life of prayer, and for every ministry of the church to begin in petition and end in praise.

One of the most striking aspects of the early church was their prayer life – both their as individuals and as churches. We read in Acts 2:42 of the believers in Jerusalem just after the day of Pentecost:

42 And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

In addition to doctrine and fellowship and breaking bread together, they were **continually devoting** themselves to prayer. Prayer was one of their ongoing core commitments. Paul wrote to the church at Colossae (Colossians 4:2):

2 Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with *an attitude of thanksgiving*;

When we devote ourselves to prayer, prayer becomes the habit of our lives. We make a sustained effort to pray. We “stay at it” even when we don’t feel like it and even when there are a dozen other things screaming for our attention.

We don’t want to multiply structures to the point where prayer meetings become one more thing to fit into crowded schedules. But there will be times when we gather specifically and exclusively to pray. But we want prayer to permeate every ministry of the church. We’ve been encouraged by the way that individual ministries are devoting themselves to prayer. Last fall, for example, Alpha organized 24 hours of prayer – for the upcoming Alpha course as well as our outreach efforts in general. Those who participated found it to be very meaningful.

As we have discussed this area of our Vision, we have concluded that our elder team should give ongoing attention to our corporate prayer life and to this cultivating a “rich, growing life of prayer.” Part of our calling as elders is to pray for the church and to pray with the church. We’re considering simple things like inviting you as a church to join us for prayer at a set time each month. This would be an open invitation; there may be 2 people or there may be 200 people who join us for this. This would be a time to pray **with** the elders – praise, thanksgiving, petition, etc. This would be a time to have elders pray for you about issues on your heart.

One of the things we’re eager to do is design spaces that are set apart for prayer. Of course God is everywhere, and we can therefore pray anywhere. But there is value in having dedicated places for prayer. You may have read in January’s newsletter that we now have a prayer garden in the northwest corner of the property. The Renewed Minds class wanted to do something to honor Frances Wood who passed away last summer. Since Frances was devoted to prayer, designing and building a prayer garden seemed appropriate. You’ll find an area set off by paving stones; you can sit on the wall or on the wooden bench. We hope you will use this space for prayer. Come as individuals, as couples or families, Life Groups, etc.

We also want to design a space for prayer in future facilities. This is an active place on Sunday mornings and probably always will be. But we want at least one space in the church that will be

peaceful and quiet – a space that is set apart specifically for prayer, a space that invites you into the presence of God in prayer.

A Plan for Spiritual Transformation

We desire to provide clear and effective structures and processes whereby all members can progress toward Christlike character, expressing their growing love for God and others through willing service to both fellow believers and unbelievers.

Discipleship has a goal: Christlike character. Being apprenticed to Jesus should actually bring about spiritual transformation. The ministries (and ministry structures) of Faith are designed to help move us along this path of discipleship. Life Groups are the core structure of the church for developing relationships with others; that's where we practice the "one anothers" of Scripture. We will also continue to provide training courses that help equip you to honor God and serve God in various ways: Network (spiritual gifts), GoodSense (finances), Just Walk Across the Room (having spiritual conversations with people already in your life). This coming year we also plan to add a Foundations Class for people who are beginning their walk with God. We also plan to add a course on Spiritual Habits (spiritual disciplines).

One of the surest marks of Christlikeness and spiritual transformation is service. Eventually we adopt the mindset of Jesus who said, "I did not come to be served, but to serve and give My life as a ransom for many." As the church matures, fewer and fewer people will be showing up with a "consumer mentality" saying, "Meet my needs. Feed me. Serve me." More and more people will be saying, "I haven't come to be served, but to serve and give my life for people." If you are not serving other people in significant ways, your spiritual growth will be stunted. God refines us as we pour ourselves out for others.

We were very encouraged by your participation in the "Season of Service" projects last fall. We got great reports about lots of service happening around town. Of course the Season of Service wasn't an end in itself; it was meant to whet our appetite for serving our community. There are ongoing needs to serve in the community throughout the year. We're actually looking for people who are willing to lead others in projects – whether through Habitat or other service organizations and ministries in town.

One area of spiritual transformation (and for service) that we target in our Vision is children's ministry. Studies show that two thirds of all those who come to faith in Christ do so before age 18. Children and youth are often more teachable and more open to the Spirit of God than others (Jesus spoke about the faith of a little child). Children and youth who come to Christ and learn how to walk with God will avoid a world of heartache. Therefore one of the most strategic things we can do is to invest deeply in our children and youth. We have immediate needs in our children's ministry for people to help in the nursery and as classroom helpers (not teachers, but helpers). If you are looking for a place to serve and are drawn toward children's ministry, check the box on your connections card that says, "I'm interested in serving in children's ministry." Chris will get in touch with you.

A Lifestyle of Worship

We desire that meaningful corporate worship on Sunday mornings be simply an expression of, and stimulus for, a lifestyle of worship in all our hearts and homes.

Paul wrote this in Romans 12:1:

1 Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship.

If you read Romans 1 through 11, when you come to Paul's statement, "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God," you stop in your tracks because "the mercy/compassion of God" is infinite. If the compassion of God were weak and small, Paul might challenge us to live one way. But since the compassion of God (as demonstrated by the death and resurrection of Jesus) is infinite, Paul says to "present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God." Everything we do in our bodies – which is actually everything we do – is supposed to be our "spiritual service of worship." Everything we do is supposed to be an expression of our love for God and our adoration of God. Our entire lifestyle is supposed to express to God, "You are worthy of everything I am and everything I have."

Worship isn't restricted to what we do on Sundays when we gather in this room. And worship certainly isn't restricted to singing. Our entire lives are supposed to be "a spiritual service of worship." That doesn't make our times of corporate worship on Sunday mornings *less* important; in some ways that makes such times *more* important.

Our worship on Sunday mornings is supposed to stimulate worship the rest of the week. Our desire is that you leave this place with fresh conviction that God deserves everything you have. We hope that our time here on Sundays stimulates you to think about how you might worship God in your family, in your workplace, in your recreation, etc. At the same time our worship on Sunday is supposed to be an expression of the lifestyle of worship we've maintained the previous week.

When we first set this vision in 2008 the primary initiative was to hire a worship pastor. God graciously led us to Micah (and led Micah to us). Micah is giving leadership to our times of corporate worship. He is working with a team of people that will also give attention to cultivating a lifestyle of worship.

An Active Compassion for those without Christ

We desire to cultivate a culture of outreach, whereby all members intentionally develop relationships with unbelievers, inviting them into the life of the church where, with a team approach, each of us plays a role in bringing people to faith in Christ.

This is what we expect our missionaries to do in other cultures and in other parts of the world. We commission them to invest time in developing relationships that might eventually bear fruit for the kingdom. We want them to be a living, breathing example of what it looks like to have a relationship with the one, true, living God. We don't send just *anybody* to do this. Along with the sending agency – whether the E-Free mission or Charstar or Pioneers or Wycliffe or AWM – we commission people who love God and who are full of compassion for others. We send out people who actually have the type of life that God wants to reproduce in others. We send out genuine disciples to make other disciples. We send them out as part of a larger team, believing that they need community for their own health and for their effectiveness. We even tell them, in effect, we want you to sacrifice in order to be used by God in this way; we're fine with it costing

you something. We believe Jesus is worthy of your sacrifice. And we love it when they come back and tell us their stories and what God has done.

What we're saying with this part of our vision is that we should have the type of life that God would want to reproduce in others. We should be disciples who make disciples. We should be people who are moved to compassion for people without Christ. We should sacrifice in order to befriend people who are far from Christ. In other words, it's not enough to keep living our lives exactly as we always have, hoping that someday we'll be able to fit some relationships into our busy lives. No, we have to sacrifice some things in order to have space in our lives for those without Christ. We should do this with a team approach. Perhaps one person invites a person to worship or to Alpha; another person befriends that person; another person prays; another person helps with hospitality; etc. By the grace of God, we each have a part to play. Our missionaries shouldn't be the only ones with stories to tell. We should have stories of how God has used us in the life of others. This isn't presumptuous to think that God would use us; this is what we understand our calling to be.

Conclusion. The vision I've been describing is more like a broad, conceptual drawing instead of detailed blueprints. We don't have it all figured out, but we have a sense of where we should be going. We invite you to make this vision your own and seek ways to embody these five priorities. These are really five biblical values that should characterize the church: hospitality, prayer, spiritual transformation, worship, and compassion.