

## Our Vision for Faith EFC

**A Tale of Two Chisels** (with apologies to Charles Dickens). A few months ago I bought a box of old, rusted chisels at a farm auction for \$3. Some had broken, cracked handles and some didn't. Most of them looked like this:



But I didn't really want a box of old, rusty chisels, so I went to work on a few of them.

I took off all the old, broken handles. My good friend Harry let me use his bead blaster to get all the rust and paint and gook off of the metal. My good friend Matt gave me some straight pieces of Osage Orange (a.k.a hedge) from his enchanted forest. I cut it into pieces, put them on my lathe, and made handles that would fit my nice, clean chisel blades. Then my good friend Jerry let me use his variable speed grinder to put a nice, clean bevel on each chisel. After flattening the back of each chisel and a little more fine-tuning I've got a set of chisels that look like this:



You know, it's possible to use old, rusty chisels (if you have a big enough mallet). But life's really too short for that. I want chisels that are a pleasure to hold and look at and that can slice through wood by applying a little pressure. Here's the point: moving from these [old, rusty] chisels to these [nice reconditioned] chisels required vision (a clear idea of what I wanted), a few resources, and some effort (4 or 5 hours). But it's worth it because I want the maximum amount of joy when it comes to woodworking.

To tell you the truth, I also want the maximum amount of joy when it comes to "church" and the body of Christ. It's possible to have a "decent church" where most people are content; where 20% of the people do 80% of the work; where one or two people come to Christ each year

(mostly by accident); where leaders are like light bulbs – you use them until they burn out and then you screw another one in. But life's too short to be satisfied with that type of church. Why not "go for" the church you really want to be.

Like the tale of two chisels, becoming the church we really want to be will require vision (a clear picture of what we want to become), some resources (people, money, time, facilities, etc.), effort (change is difficult), and faith (not really required for chisels). It is possible for a church to make significant changes by the grace of God.

Over the past year our leadership has been praying, talking, and dreaming about the type of church God wants us to become over the next 3 to 5 years. Today I am going to try to paint a picture/vision of what that church might look like. I am going to limit myself to a picture of what Sunday mornings here at Faith might look like. I realize that the life of the church extends far beyond Sunday mornings, but what happens here on Sundays should both represent and stimulate what happens the rest of the week. In coming weeks and months we'll be gathering resources and exerting effort and exercising faith in the pursuit of this vision. [This message is different than other weeks; I normally teach through a passage of Scripture. Next week we begin a study of 1 Thessalonians.]

Over the next three to five years, as we pursue our mission of helping people come to faith in Christ and experience God in all of life, 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.*

When guests show up here on a Sunday morning, they experience "extravagant hospitality." We won't merely be friendly; we will actually befriend others who have come to worship. Welcoming people in this way will be very genuine and natural, but also very intentional. This will require that there be space in our *lives* for new relationships. This will require that there be space in our Sunday-morning *schedule* (instead of being so busy we don't notice others). And this will require that there be space in our *facility* (which will need to be modified and expanded).

Faith E-Free will always be an active place; there will always be children running around, people talking with each other or laughing/crying with each other. But by the grace of God it won't always be such a *busy* place in the sense that newcomers get overlooked because we are so intent moving from one activity to the next. Five years from now, nobody will leave Faith E-Free on a Sunday morning without being noticed and welcomed into the life of the church.

Three to five years from now, each of us who consider this our church home arrive with a sense of stewardship toward those who enter our doors. We sense that the people who enter the doors of this building have been entrusted to us – if even for one Sunday – and therefore we have a responsibility to God to welcome them into our midst.

We are mindful that some people show up at church with great motivation and skill to get involved in the life of the church. Such people need to be pointed the right direction and they do the rest. But we will also be mindful that any given Sunday some have shown up with a degree of anxiety or even fear. We are mindful that some are giving the church "one more chance"

before giving up on God completely. We are mindful that some are struggling with some type of addiction; they don't merely need to sit anonymously in a church service once a week; they need genuine friendships with people who care and who can help. We are mindful that some have marriages that are in real trouble; they don't need pat answers or clichés; they need hope and tangible help.

In one way or another all of these people are asking the same question: Do these people really care about me? Is there a place for me here at this church?

Our sense of stewardship toward such people will compel us to alter the way we think, speak, and act on Sunday morning. This culture of welcome and acceptance will mean that 200 to 300 of us arrive each Sunday morning with a heart and mind to befriend and welcome people. This desire burns in our souls to the point that we step out of our comfort zones and think less about ourselves and more about others.

A while back several of us received letters from a young man who attended here when he was in college. I'll read a few lines of his letter as an example of the impact of this type of welcoming. He talked about how he wasn't sure whether or not he'd find another church home when he moved away from Manhattan.

“... my time at FEFC will always be dear to me. I think the people of your congregation, yourself included, provided a vital foundation for me as a young Christian and played a crucial part in the ease of my transition [to a new church].

I won't forget the first few mornings I nervously sat there in the sanctuary, staring at my shoes and hoping not to be noticed only to be approached by you or Brian with a genuine welcome to the service and a sincere interest in having me return. . . . If I may, without seeming presumptuous, I'd like to offer a word of encouragement and to express my gratitude, which are really, the whole point of my writing to you: please, don't ever underestimate God's ability to reach people through you and via seemingly small gestures like those you extended to me. Thank you for all that you've done for me and for heeding His call to act as you did.”

That's the impact that a “culture of welcome and acceptance” can have in the lives of those who enter our doors.

### **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.*

Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, “Pray without ceasing.” The core idea is that you're always inclined toward God in prayer. You live your days and nights in the presence of God in ongoing conversation (speaking and listening). By the grace of God, when we show up on Sunday mornings we will have enjoyed a week of such prayer. And so it's very natural that we continue in prayer as we're here on Sunday morning.

As we gather for worship, we will prayerfully sing and give and receive the Word. We're not merely observers or evaluators or by-standers. Rather the songs we sing express the cry of our

heart to God. The offering is actually an act of worship, an offering to God. During the sermon we are prayerfully listening for the voice of God. Of course there will also be designated times of prayer. When someone prays from the front, the rest of the church isn't listening to someone else pray; the rest of the church is entering in wholeheartedly and offering the same praises and petitions from the heart.

There will also be times when people can request and receive prayer – either during the service or before/after the service. A team of pray-ers will be available during the services. Perhaps the message that morning has addressed Matthew 16:24 where Jesus says, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." Perhaps God convicts you of a way in which you need to "deny yourself" – say no to yourself – so that you can follow Jesus more fully. But you feel so very weak in that area of your life. And so during the singing after the message you move to the back of worship center so that the prayer team can pray for you. This conviction to deny yourself in some way will be more than a fleeting thought; partially as a result of prayer, it will be a work that God is doing in your life.

Or perhaps you come to church some Sunday morning with a heavy burden: a loved one has deployed to Iraq, you're facing serious health issues, a relationship is strained. There will be a team of people who can pray for protection or healing or reconciliation. You leave that morning strengthened by the prayers of people who care about you and who have brought you before God in prayer.

Lord willing, five years from now our facilities will reflect this deepening life of prayer. Future facilities will include at least one room that is specifically designated for prayer. There will be at least one space in the church that will be peaceful and quiet – a space that is set apart for that specific purpose, 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.*

All believers – regardless of their age and life situation – should be actively engaged in the process of spiritual transformation. This spiritual transformation involves taking on the likeness of Jesus Himself – becoming characterized more and more by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. God brings about this transformation, but we put ourselves in a position for God to do this work through corporate and personal spiritual disciplines.

Five years from now each of us will show up on Sunday mornings with a sense of where we are in this process of spiritual transformation. Instead of a vague sense of "I'm doing pretty well spiritually" or "I don't know what's wrong with me," we will each have a sense of the next steps we need to take in our spiritual transformation. The classes we provide on Sunday mornings (and at other times) will be very intentional in this regard. Our classes will reflect a plan for spiritual transformation: they will intentionally help you take the next step in your walk with God. A particular class might address the contents of the Bible or an area of theology (such as the character of God, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, or ethics). Classes might address spiritual

disciplines, how to study the Bible, how to share your faith, or honoring God with your finances. Our classes on Sunday morning will be very intentional.

One measure of our spiritual transformation will be our willingness (and even eagerness) to serve. As we've already described, the vast majority of us will show up with hearts to serve and give. There will be seasons where our Sunday mornings involve participating in worship and participating in a class. But just as often our Sundays involve worshipping one hour and serving another hour.

Children and youth ministries will be a special priority on Sunday mornings. 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. Whereas we provide ministries to adults throughout the week, the primary time we invest in our children is on Sunday mornings. We also invest in our youth on Sunday evenings at youth group. But since Sunday mornings are so strategic, we want our children's and youth ministry on Sunday mornings to be "premier."

Three to five years from now, by the grace of God our children's and youth ministries will be fully staffed with people who are passionate about the spiritual transformation of children and youth. As a matter of fact, there will be such conviction about the strategic importance of children and youth coming to faith in Christ and experiencing God in every area of their lives that we will have a reservoir of people who are eager to serve. To some of them we have to say, "Sorry, we're fully staffed right now. Please continue to pray for our children/youth. . . We'll try to work you into a position next semester."

Our children and youth aren't merely "the church of the future"; they are part of the church today. Therefore their spiritual transformation is a priority for us as a church.

### **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.*

Three to five years from now, when we arrive for worship on a Sunday morning, it hasn't been 7 days since we've worshipped God. Rather, we've been worshipping God as a way of life throughout the week. There have been times of private worship that previous week where we've poured out our adoration and thanksgiving to God. We've left such times satisfied, but even more significantly God has left such times "blessed" (as in "Bless the Lord, O my soul" - Psalm 103:1).

And perhaps there have been times of worship within our families or Bible studies where we've experienced the dynamic of "teaching and admonishing one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" (Colossians 3:16). And we've even had the sense that we've offered up all sorts of other spiritual sacrifices to God throughout the week by the way we've lived.

And so when we arrive for worship on Sunday mornings, it hasn't been 7 days since we've worshipped. We've had numerous significant experiences of worshipping God. As a result, our

corporate worship here on that Sunday morning will be an expression of this lifestyle. And our corporate worship here on that Sunday morning will stimulate this lifestyle.

Our leadership here at Faith has concluded that the most strategic thing we can do to pursue this lifestyle of worship is to **hire a worship pastor**. We've been discussing this possibility for quite some time. After congregation-wide discussions, we voted in August of 2007 to hire a worship pastor as soon as it was financially feasible. For the past year this has meant monitoring congregational giving to discern whether or not we could support the salary/benefits package for a worship pastor. As some of you have pointed out, the issue of hiring a worship pastor has been rather invisible on Sunday mornings; many of probably weren't aware that we have the desire to hire a worship pastor.

This past year giving has remained high enough to meet expenses, but not high enough to hire a worship pastor. As a matter of fact, giving has remained level over the past three years. But in light of this component of our Vision regarding a "lifestyle of worship," and in light of the need for someone to give overall leadership to our existing worship ministries, and in light of the opportunities that exist to extend worship into other ministries (such as outreach), we are proposing a change of course concerning the hiring a worship pastor.

Specifically, we are proposing that we build salary and benefits for a worship pastor into our 2009 budget. We'll be voting on this budget in November. Our elders and our worship leadership team sense that this is the approach God would have us take. We are stepping out in faith with this proposal; we are trusting God to provide both the finances and the right person to lead our worship ministries. We present this need to you to ask you to pray and to give.

In November we will be talking more about giving toward the hiring of a worship pastor and toward the 2009 budget. But we would urge you to begin evaluating how you might give to the church in 2009. We realize that people are in a number of different places in terms of giving. Some of you are not yet giving here at Faith; maybe you've never really asked the question, "What portion of my income should go to the local church?" We would encourage you to ask this question and begin giving by faith. Others of you are already giving regularly and faithfully but you have the capacity to give more so that we might pursue this Vision – especially this component of hiring a worship pastor. Others of you are already giving regularly but really are not able to give more; if that's your situation, you shouldn't have any guilt whatsoever. We only ask that each of us listen to God and follow His leading when it comes to giving.

Hiring a worship pastor will require a significant increase in giving. And so please consider your own response and please pray for God's leading and God's provision.

### **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.*

By the grace of God, three to five years from now, every one of us here on a Sunday morning will be able to look across the room and see at least one other person that we've helped come to faith in Christ. We have been moved to compassion because we want people to experience Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Out of compassion, we have sought the well-being of our community.

We have served our community in very tangible ways; we have prayed to the Lord on its behalf. And we have befriended people in our neighborhoods, in our classes, in the workplace, etc. We have entered into their lives and they have entered into ours. Since Jesus is at the center of our lives, we've explained who He is and what He means to us. We have included our friends in the life of the church: Alpha, music nights, cookouts and barbecues, service projects, and Sunday worship. And we've befriended those whom others have invited and included. And many of our friends have come to faith in Christ. We take great satisfaction in looking across the room on Sunday mornings and realizing that *we've* played a role: we've invited, prayed, served, and befriended people.

This realization that God can use us to lead others to Christ makes us more sensitive to others on Sunday mornings. We realize that there are people there that very day whom God is drawing to Himself. This realization changes the way we think about Sunday mornings; we show up with a sense of expectancy about God using us to help others come to faith in Christ.

**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. As with the chisels I described earlier, this vision will require resources (people, money, and facilities) and effort. We are in the process of forming teams of people who will bring resources and effort to each of the five areas of this vision.

This vision will also require us to have more faith than we've ever had. We're not pursuing things that we can pull off in our own strength or things that are probably going to happen anyway. This vision will require us to trust God like never before. And so we are inviting you to give yourself to this Vision – really to give yourself to God like never before. What if . . . what if . . . God would bring about what we've been talking about here today!?! Life is too short and there's too much at stake to settle for a church that isn't everything God wants us to be.