

Vision Sunday – January 20, 2008

Several months ago Lori and I were invited to have dinner at a couple's home that had been visiting the church. This was a great couple that we had enjoyed getting to know through their visits to The Crossings. After arriving at their home we began with the usual small talk, or more specifically the way you would talk when you are first getting to know someone. When we had sat down and began eating the husband began asking me questions regarding the church. Now, I should tell you that I love talking about the church. Second to my family, the church that God has called us to give our life to is something about which I am extremely passionate. He asked me if I had a vision for The Crossings, and if so did I mind describing it to him. Well, I began a monologue that had been rehearsed through many similar conversations. I articulated from memory but in a conversational form what has been published on our website as well as the worship guides on Sunday mornings.

Once I finished my description of the preferred future that God had laid on my heart some years ago, he replied, "that is not a vision." I asked him what he meant and he began describing the "vision" of the church he had previously attended. He talked about their goals to reach all of these specific levels of growth at specific periods time. He described the strategy through which all of these goals were going to be reached. Then he looked at me and said, "A vision is something people can get excited about and join in order to bring to fruition." I have no doubt that he is a great man who probably found a wonderful church in the community, however I learned a lot about what God was doing in my life through that conversation. I do not have a business plan for this church. If you are hoping for me to articulate some goals similar to what many of you would hear from your CEO where you work, then you are going to leave today very disappointed.

I believe that Paul was at a very crucial point in his ministry when he and Barnabas went different ways. They had a disagreement and then Barnabas journeyed on with John Mark while Paul left with Silas. Paul and Silas met Timothy for the first time and the three of them were all set to head out on a life of mission to announce the great story of Jesus. However, in **Acts 16:6** they were traveling around and it looks like, as we read the text that the Father was telling them very loudly what not to do instead of exactly what to do. **Verse 6** says, "they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia." **Verse 7** says, "they attempted to go into Bythynia, but the spirit of Jesus did not allow them." Then in **verse 9** a vision appears to Paul. Paul sees a man of Macedonia who is urging him to come and help the people there. After seeing this vision Paul get's his things together and hits the road knowing only that God had called him to preach the gospel to those of Macedonia.

A very similar story is found in the first book of the Bible. Abraham, in **Genesis 12**, is told to "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." So, Abraham went. As hard as it is for us to reconcile, I believe that God often calls us to something and waits for our obedience. Then, once we obey, at different points along the path, he reveals himself and his vision as we become more dependent on him. Many of you work in the business world where your business plan is paramount in your planning process. Most of your questions regarding future engagements are laid out

in a document written by the board or an entrepreneur. Furthermore, there are many churches in which their business plan is paramount in their process of doing church. That is not the church God has called The Crossings to be.

As I found myself in that place similar to Paul where I knew God was calling me to plant a church, I knew which direction to go but that was about it. After Lori and I had committed ourselves to this direction that we both had been given, we began seeing the landscape of our Macedonia.

- Did you know that one of the greatest concerns among those who live within the Katy community is parenting skills? Did you know this is one of the most significant reasons that bring them to the church? They come to church and then become dependent upon the church to parent their children.
- Did you know that the other great concern of those who live around us is achieving a fulfilling marriage? However, within our religious culture and community the health of marriage is no different with those who claim to be believers in Jesus and those do not.
- I do not have to ask you if you know, I am confident that all of you are aware that most of the people you work with and live around see their children approximately 90 minutes per day.
- You are also aware that most of us have very little to zero personal time. For the most part, there is no personal time because we have to be such a hard worker to fit into this culture in which we find ourselves. Most people have a desire for something different but they feel like it will come later after they have worked hard and built up their financial security.
- Did you know that 80% percent of the people in our community believe there is a God? But, maybe more importantly did you know that across our nation 84% of the people believe there is a God?
- Did you know that 64% of the population across our nation believes that God is actively involved in the world while only 54% percent of those living inside the zip codes 77450 & 77494 agree with that statement?

I have studied volumes of demographic data done by huge companies with huge resources. However, I have personally done a lot of research amidst our community. It is funny, when I tell folks that I am doing doctoral research and I would like to be able to ask them a couple questions, they almost always agree. I do not think they are aware that doctoral dissertations end up cluttering libraries rather than being read by the general public. But, it works out well for me to have such great compliance. Anyway, I was speaking to a local business owner who, due to his business, has a very good pulse on the community. He told me that people seem to have it all here in Katy. Without me asking, he said that it was a very religious community. I asked him what made him say that and he told me that it comes up very often that people have just come from a church event or they are on their way to one.

I will never forget any trip that I have taken to the children's hospital. Maybe some of you have been there... you walk in to a place that looks nothing like any hospital that you have seen before. It is painted with all of these primary colors and shapes. You see baby

beds and toys scattered around. The feeling is much different than the usual cold feeling that you would have at a hospital. But as you walk around you see these beautiful children who are so young and innocent. The halls are full of children who are all near the age of those in this room and across the hall. Have you ever seen a baby who is on feeding tubes? Oh, such a heart wrenching site. Anyone, no matter what their age, who is on a feeding tube cannot take in their own nutrients and therefore someone has to manually force a tube into them and pump nutrients into their body so that it can continue to function properly. God has called us to a Macedonia that is filled with people who are searching for answers and some have found a solution that is often times nothing more than a feeding tube that has been inserted to provide spiritual nutrients. That feeding tube is an event, a building, and an activity, even a sermon.

The mural of Macedonia that God has painted in my heart is one of individuals searching for authentic meaning and relationships, marriages crumbling behind the walls of a beautiful home and a new car, parents searching for answers and becoming dependent upon activities or events, and homes either filled with religion or disgusted by it but both completely missing the life changing message of Jesus Christ. Within this Macedonia I ask what if, as **Acts chapter 2** describes, a community existed that was completely devoted to the teaching of Jesus and the scriptures? What if individuals, marriages, and parents were infused and invigorated by hearing and discussing the teachings of scripture? What if awe fell upon everyone because of their love of the scriptures? What if there was such great unity, not uniformity, among their purpose that they found real authentic relationships in which to journey through life? What if there was a community where people were selfless as they served those in need locally, nationally, and internationally? What if there was a group of people who lived life repairing the reputation of Jesus by living not in religion but in a true relationship with him? What if there was a community such as this that gathered as a group once per week and as small groups once per week with the simple goal of transformation by the gospel of Jesus Christ and bringing others along with them?

When the church was formed it existed in a much different age and culture than we are in today. However, the principles of the church remain. **READ Acts 2:42-47.**

READ VISION STATEMENT

We see a church that, above all else, seeks to glorify God through transforming lives into disciples of Jesus Christ.

We see a church that forces the subjectivity and relativity of the world to collide with the objectivity of Biblical truth. We see the wall between the sacred and the secular coming into contact with a holistic approach to ministry that is relational and creative while being Biblically inspired, sustained, and driven.

In a culture of materialism and consumerism, we see a missional church reaching the world through Biblical teaching, transformational community, and global engagement. We see a church that takes people from infancy to intimacy in their relationship with Jesus Christ.

We also see a missional church that announces the kingdom of God through church multiplication. We dream of churches being planted and supported locally, nationally, and

internationally. We dream of sending teams across the globe in order to see kingdom growth through Christ centered communities.

We see a church that challenges spiritual mediocrity and complacency through prayer in conjunction, and upon conclusion of every ministry opportunity. We see a church that engages in prayer, corporately and in solitude, as intercessors for those hurting, serving, and rejoicing.

We dream of a church that removes the façade of suburban perfection through engaging in transformational community. We see Christ centered communities that will experience authentic relationships while traveling through the many crossings of life. We see a church composed of small groups that scatter throughout the area, experiencing community and impacting neighborhoods, subdivisions, the city, and the world.

Friends, there is no business plan available for facilitating this kind of community within the culture that we live. As a leader who is very marked by our American culture, it is hard for me to stand before you and say that I do not have all of the answers. However, I can tell you that I know who does have all of the answers and I spend time crying out to him everyday for vision and revival on behalf of our church community and our geographic community. In the **first chapter of Nehemiah**, Nehemiah receives word that his people are in great trouble. He finds out that the wall, the only protection any city could have at that point in time, was destroyed and had never been repaired. Nehemiah's own community was in grave danger and the story says in **verse 4**, "As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven."

In **Isaiah chapter 37** Hezekiah finds himself in a life and death situation. Sennacherib who was the leader of the greatest army known in that time, the Assyrian army, was on his way to lay waste to Hezekiah and his people. Hezekiah's community was in imminent danger and he had no answers to the questions his people were asking. There was absolutely no way for Hezekiah to avert the great Assyrian army. The story tells us that Hezekiah began to pray with all of his might and all of his heart, "save us from his hand." God answers Hezekiah in **verse 21** by saying; "because you have prayed to me" I will deliver you.

I can tell you that I have read almost every book available on "how to do church" and I have a great number of very special friends who are pastors of incredible churches. However, I have found that I do not speak the same language that they speak and there is no book that lays out the answers to the questions that I am asking. Yet I know that there must be more, there absolutely must be more to the desires of our Lord than what has manifested in the lives that we live.

Sometimes I do dialogue and begin speaking to the questions that they ask me. I have to be careful when I do this because I know that I am going to spark some further dialogue and often times disagreement. One of the most frequently asked questions that I hear is, "Where and when are you planning on buying land?" When I answer them that I am in no

hurry to do that and actually our first property will not be a church building, I get quite a confused look. I begin describing that God has given me a vision for a space that is frequented by the community, such as a coffee shop or other relational space, where people come their during the day or evening and may not realize at first glance that they are in a space where people worship on Sunday morning. Maybe there is photographic art on the wall of our engagements in the Philippines or impressionistic paintings inspired by a sermon series or what God has done in someone's life through our work at the Pregnancy Help Center. Rather than being a space seen within the category of religion it is one that is seen in the category of community.

Being in Katy I will often get asked about our children's ministry. I tell them that our children's ministry has been in transition since day one. We have wonderful volunteers serving and we all know that we need to make some changes. It is our desire to create an environment where mom and dad are taught and empowered to teach their children about Jesus. We do not want to facilitate the current culture of parents looking for help and finding a dependency through others whether church or otherwise. We want to facilitate environments where entire families and households are engaged in the journey of knowing Christ together. We want to facilitate an environment where mom and dad are equipped to teach and lead their children as **Deuteronomy 6:4** describes, as homes that love the Lord with all of their heart, soul, and mind, and those that teach their children the teachings of scripture as they sit in their house, as they walk through the activities of the day, when they go to bed, and when they rise. In the coming weeks you will see our children's ministry in flux and continuing to take shape. We will be experimenting with some changes very soon with our nose to the ground seeking direction from the Father on how to pursue this vision that He has given.

A question that I do not often get asked but something I love to talk about is the mission focus of our church. Whether people ask or not they are going to hear about it. I love telling people that within our first month of meeting we were serving a local Sudanese population in Houston. I love telling people that in our first year we put our feet on the other side of the world and built relationships with people to begin partnering to plant churches in the Philippines. I love telling people that it was not just a one time trip to the Philippines but that we are going back this July and, by the grace of God, we will take a team of 8-10 people there - and it will change their lives to support what God is doing there. I love describing our involvement and support at the Pregnancy Help Center. We have painted, pulled weeds, walked, fund raised, and so much more. I absolutely love telling people that the focus of our Christmas season was on 15 families who were in need of various life essentials in which we were able to help them. And, it does not stop there as just this last week we were communicating with a local organization that helps underprivileged kids through art. I love telling people that our church community is not about us but we are about serving locally, nationally, and internationally - and we are about inviting people to join with us.

Of course another issue that is brought up in abundantly different ways is how we measure our success. I am honest that I struggle constantly with this as a sinful human who has grown up in a ministry world very different than the one to which God has now

called me. I have set goals and then thrown them in the trash and I have sat and stared at a blank sheet of paper for hours on end. Even this past week I fought my humanity and the temptation of worldly business models as I prepared for this sermon. However, if our goal is to see homes, whether single or large family homes, transformed by the truth of Jesus Christ then the conventional Sunday morning attendance numbers will not speak to this goal. The closest aspect of ministry that communicates transformation is the health and growth of our small groups. When people begin to establish real relationships and begin to serve each other selflessly while discussing how to live life following Jesus, transformation begins to take place. We could have 500 hundred in attendance on Sunday morning, coming and going through the motions of doing church, all sucking on feeding tubes, all the while not experiencing the transformation that is currently happening in our *four* small groups.

As of the first of this year we have changed all of our small groups to a weekly meeting. Each and every week they will pursue deeper relationships as we discuss the scripture of Sunday morning in a real, honest, application oriented setting. Then, once per month or once every 6-8 weeks we meet as a group to just relax and spend time together in a way that makes it easily accessible to invite others on the journey with us. This is the lifeblood of The Crossings. We worship together for about 90 minutes on Sunday morning and we sit together on the couches and floors of a home for 90 minutes each week. That is it guys, if they want to the ladies might get together to have brunch and guys might get together to play cards, but we refuse to facilitate a busy spirituality in which you have no time to build relationships with your neighbors or coworkers because of your church commitments. We want to be able to come together and refuel and sharpen each other and challenge each other to invite others on this journey with us.

This is much different than the church growth to which many are accustomed. We are not going to have the big events where 300-400 people show up to hear a great guest speaker. This does not take us down the path of holistic homes being transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Instead, we will each, while on the path of transformation ourselves, invite others to join us as the scriptures say in **Matthew 28**, as you are going, make followers of Jesus – baptize them and teach them.

I invite you to join in the journey of pursuing transformation. I invite you to join the vision that God has given to this church. We are making a significant effort to let this community know that we, as a church, exist. We are not inviting them to come to an elaborate church extravaganza, but we are putting our name on their kitchen tables. We are putting an ad in one of the Katy magazines, we are having our new cards for our sermon series that is starting next Sunday put into the bags of 4,000 of the folks that eat at Chick-Fil-A this week, we are buying 100 cups of coffee for those on Tuesday morning who begin their day by stopping at Dunn Bros coffee. We are beginning our four-week series *Awaken* next week followed by a four-week series on the book of Jonah that will lead us right up to Easter. We are attempting to do everything that we can to let the community know we are here so that as we go, you and I can invite others on this journey with us.

I would like to take you back to one of the paragraphs in our vision statement. Let me read it to you.

*We see a church that challenges spiritual mediocrity and complacency through **prayer** in conjunction, and upon conclusion of every ministry opportunity. We see a church that engages in prayer, corporately and in solitude, as intercessors for those hurting, serving, and rejoicing.*

I invite you to join us today at 3 pm at the Cinco Ranch Beach Club for a time of prayer as we gather as a church, responding to him as Nehemiah, Hezekiah, and so many others throughout the pages of scripture have. I do not mean to offend you but I will say that if you are torn because there is a football game on television this afternoon, then I would prefer you stay at home and watch the game. God works in mighty ways through the authentic prayers of his people and if your heart is not authentic before him this afternoon then you are not achieving anything by showing up. There are not many occasions of which I would speak so strongly, but this is not one of our usual gatherings.

We are going to begin the music but I want you to stay in your seat. You have a piece of paper and a pen in front of you. I want to invite you in this time of response to write down a prayer to the Father on behalf of our community. Children, I want to invite you to join with us. Write down a prayer for your friend(s) at school, a teacher, or neighbor. Adults, will you write out a prayer for our community asking God to go before our church to create a revival of transformation within the homes of our area? You might want to pray specifically for your neighborhood or a group in which you are involved. You may just want to pray for the community at large. Whatever God lays on your heart I want you to write it down. Children, it can be just one sentence. Adults, it is whatever God lays on your heart. We are not in a hurry; take some time to articulate your words to the Father. Do not write your name on the paper, we want these to be anonymous. Please take a few minutes to work on this because we are going to combine these as our collective prayer as his church. Just place them on your chair or on the table before you leave.

Small Group Discussion

You might feel it appropriate to let the group know that this is a very different week due to the topic on Sunday morning. You might want to remind them that normally the group will be discussing a passage of scripture that was taught on the previous Sunday. We have 4 weeks of Acts coming to complete the book, and then we will transition to a four-week discussion of Jonah that will lead us to Easter.

Introduction: Facilitators, consider beginning by offering how God spoke to you on Sunday morning. Try to set the tone of the discussion by being honest and transparent in hopes that others will do the same.

1. Did anything surprise you about the words that were said on Sunday morning?
2. How does the vision God has given to The Crossings interact with your experience around church? Is it the same or different? Why?
3. After thinking about the discussion on Sunday morning, how would you describe your role at The Crossings?
4. When you think about your being on a journey of transformation, what does that practically mean to you? What does the path ahead look like?
5. What are some ways that this small group can be on the journey together?
6. Are there some practical things that this small group can do to facilitate inviting others on the journey as well?
7. Do you feel like God has placed you in a specific segment of the community (neighborhood, workplace, volunteer group, specific group of friends, etc) as a missionary to those people? If so, what segment of the community?

Closing: Based on the direction you decide to take the discussion, think of a good closing. Since our goal is application and community, we want to make sure everyone leaves with something practical to apply to life. Also, we would like people to voice that application within the group allowing others the opportunity to grow from it.