

Transitioning into God's Future

Henry Blackaby, in the classic study *Experiencing God* that has been used by God to powerfully impact millions of believers across the world, states seven realities of experiencing God. One of those realities is that you must make major adjustments in your life to join God in what He is doing! Stated another way, you cannot stay where you are and go with God at the same time. Biblical example after Biblical example shows us this is true as well as the testimony of countless believers throughout history who have radically adjusted their lives in response to God's call. Another reality is that God's invitation for you to work with Him always leads you to a crisis of belief that requires faith and action. Blackaby writes, "This is a major turning point where many people miss out on experiencing God's mighty power working through them. If they cannot see exactly how everything can be done, they will not proceed. They want to walk with God by sight. To follow God, you will have to walk by faith, and faith always requires action." God has brought us to just such a turning point in the life of our fellowship as we seek to walk with Him in new ways, trusting in His provision and guidance along the way.

One Mission

For years we have focused on walking with God around one core mission: To glorify God by developing fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ motivated by a love for God and a love for others. This mission statement is built on two foundational scripture passages for any biblically functioning church fellowship: "*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*" *Matthew 28:19-20 (The Great Commission)* "*One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'*" *Matthew 22:35-40 (The Great Commandment)*

From these two foundational passages, we see five key purposes that God has for every church fellowship and every individual follower of Jesus Christ. These five are: Discipleship (Growing Like Christ), Fellowship (Connecting to Christ's Body), Worship (Knowing, Loving and Obeying Christ), Ministry (Serving Christ) and Evangelism (Sharing Christ). These five purposes will be present and in harmony in the life of any healthy church and any healthy follower of Jesus Christ. The exact expressions of these purposes will look different from church to church and person to person, but these five purposes will manifest themselves in any church or individual that is fully devoted to Jesus Christ.

In the life of an individual believer there are five key personal practices we call "Living By G.R.A.C.E." that help us move forward in full devotion to Jesus Christ and in fulfilling His purposes for our lives. These five practices are:

- **Grow** - Practice personal spiritual growth habits (spiritual disciplines) (2 Peter 3:18; Romans 8:29 and 1 Timothy 4:7-8). Certain habits like spending time reading, studying and meditating on God's Word and time alone with God in prayer put us in a position to allow God to move more fully in our lives conforming us to the character and conduct of Jesus Christ.
- **Right place of service** (Ephesians 2:10; 1 Corinthians 12:4 and 1 Peter 4:10). Every believer is designed by God to serve others inside and outside the body of Christ. A non-

serving Christian is a disobedient Christian and is missing out on much of what God wants to do in and through their lives.

- **Attend weekly worship service** (Matthew 4:10; Matthew 22:37-38 and Acts 2:42). The New Testament believers gathered together for a corporate experience of worship. Someone can certainly worship God alone and at any time and any place, but the New Testament example and command is to assemble with other believers for the purpose of worshipping God together as brothers and sisters in Christ. While the exact style of worship will change from culture to culture and generation to generation, the Bible tells us that our worship must be “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).
- **Connect to a healthy small group** (Mark 3:14; Romans 12:4-5 and Hebrews 10:25). While we can worship together in large group settings, to experience true community, support, encouragement and accountability we also need to be connected meaningfully to other believers in smaller settings to experience all that God has for our lives. As a church grows larger numerically, it must grow smaller by having an increasing number of smaller settings where people can connect meaningfully to God and to one another. These settings may look different, ranging from an Adult Bible Fellowship class to a small group that meets together in a home, but the principal is the same—life-on-life connection built around God’s Word. If a group gets too large the deepest levels of connection, encouragement and accountability will get lost.
- **Engage in personal evangelism** (Acts 1:8; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 and Matthew 28:19-20). Not everyone is called to be an evangelist like Billy Graham, but every believer is called and empowered to be a witness to the transformational, saving power of Jesus Christ. Our lives as fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ and our lips should speak about the life transforming love and truth of Jesus Christ. We are God’s plan to reach the world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, beginning in Fort Mill, SC, and extending to the uttermost parts of the earth.

The precepts and principles of God’s Word never change. However, the specific application of those precepts and principles will often change. For a local church, the message of God’s Word and the purposes He has for our lives will never change, but the specifics of schedules, programs, facilities, etc., will constantly change and evolve as we seek to follow Jesus Christ and move in obedience to His call. Too often, we can fall in love with the way that we “do church.” We begin to depend upon a certain style or program that we are comfortable with instead of relying on God to guide us moment by moment and obediently adjusting ourselves to His call. Our dependence must always be on God Himself and never on any particular style or program. This tendency to depend on a style or program is not limited to any particular age or to a particular style. All of us can become dependent on certain forms, styles or programs more than God regardless of our age or preferences in style and programming. Praise God that as a church family we have been able to adjust, change and grow in obedience to God through the years. We are focused more on going with God than staying where we are!

The next email in this series will talk about the current challenge we face!

This is the second in a series of emails regarding the upcoming schedule changes taking place in September 2009. Hopefully this information will be helpful as we transition together into God’s future! As this series progresses, previous emails in this series will be available for viewing on the church’s website.

The Challenge

God has continued to grow His body here at Fort Mill First Baptist Church, both numerically and spiritually. Our average Sunday morning worship attendance has more than tripled over the past dozen years. Through these years we have adjusted our worship styles (adding a contemporary service), schedules (adding a service, a Sunday School and too many other examples to list here), programming (changing the way we do discipleship, missions and so many other examples) and facilities (adding new worship and education space). Through it all we have sought to be obedient to God's leadership every step of the way. We have certainly not always done it perfectly, but we have always sought to make any adjustments in obedience to God.

At this time we are facing another challenge in the life of our church family. God is continuing to send new people our way, entrusting us with the stewardship to help them become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. While we cannot "force" or "cause" anyone to grow and change, we can cooperate with God by providing environments that will be most conducive to people growing into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. Paul put it this way, *"I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building."* (1 Corinthians 3:6-9)

The challenge is that we are rapidly running out of space in our contemporary service and in our education space. We have been in overflow seating in our chapel area for a couple of years during the contemporary service. When we moved into our new worship space less than five years ago, we knew we would one day need to go back to three worship services to accommodate the increasing number of folks God sends our way. We also realize we do not have the education space to accommodate continued growth with three services with our current model of programming. **Our crisis or challenge is God's opportunity!** The leadership of our church has been seeking God's direction for a couple of years about the next steps He would have us to take. Countless options were evaluated through prayer, conversations within our church fellowship and with other churches.

For almost a year we have been testing the use of small groups meeting in homes as a way to relieve some of the space issues we are and will continually be facing. As a whole these groups have exceeded our expectations. Not only do they potentially provide space relief, but they provide a smaller environment where life transformation can take place with increased community, encouragement, and accountability. (See the FAQ sheet on the website for other advantages of small groups.) God has confirmed that small groups are not merely a way to alleviate space challenges, but a next step in creating the best environments for developing fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ through the Fort Mill First Baptist family. We shouldn't be surprised, after all this was the model of the first church in the New Testament (see Acts 2:42-47 and the rest of the book of Acts).

We are convinced that God is putting us in position for an exciting new chapter in the life and ministry of Fort Mill First Baptist Church. As we step out in obedience to Him and learn the lessons He would have us learn along the way, we will be in position for God to do some of His most fruitful work in us and through us in the years ahead! Can you imagine the possibilities of God using us to impact for eternity more and more lives in Fort Mill, Tega Cay, Indian Land, Rock Hill and South Charlotte? Can you imagine God sending out increasing numbers of people from our fellowship all over the world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Can you imagine freeing up millions of dollars for ministry and missions instead of investing in additional adult education

space? What might God be preparing to do through us as we step out in obedience to Him?

“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.” (Ephesians 3:20-21)

Future emails in this series will give further information about the upcoming changes for adults, children and students as we adjust to God’s call. Please keep an eye open for them. In the meantime, let us pray together that God will guide us every step of this journey and that we will joyfully and expectantly adjust ourselves to His call. Our desire is to not miss out on anything that God has in store for us as we continually adjust ourselves to His call, joining Him in His work and experiencing God as never before.