

Breaking Down Walls 2

Last week I began to share with you a broad outline of where we might want to go – i.e., in our focus, our direction – as the People of 1st UMC of Moorestown in ministry. I shared with you my conviction that if we want to become more intentional about fulfilling our mission statement, that we need to have a more clearly articulated plan on how we expect to do that.

So I am having conversations within our program staff, conversations which have already begun to ‘spill out’ among our laity, our leadership, and God is *already* moving. There is a lot that we need to accomplish, and I know that in our instant culture many of us would like to do it all, and see it all, like **now!** (If not ‘yesterday’.) But this is going to be a process, and if we are going to do it right, if we are going to be **pro-** active and not **re-**active, we need to be patient, and ‘wait on the Lord’s timing.’

So, the #1 item – goal – on our Pastor’s report for this week’s Church Conference is to “Clarify our Vision Statement”, i.e., what do we expect to see as the “end result’ of our Mission Statement? And ‘clarify’ is a generous word choice, since we don’t have a Vision Statement *per se* at all! Ha! But we do have something in our collective mind, which is obvious by the fruit that is being produced in this Church already. But we need to identify what we’re trying to accomplish more specifically, name it, and then we can all work toward it.

#2 on that same list of 2010 goals, is to “Clarify a **path** or a general plan to bring people to #1”. So, first, a statement on what we expect to *see* as we are working together to accomplish our mission, but also some *strategy* on how we expect to *get there*.

These things are crucial, but they can’t be rushed. They have to ‘simmer’ and they’ll eventually become obvious to us, if we’re looking for them. We will likely bring in someone to work with us in this process, so that part is a long- range project; it is a goal for this year.

On the other hand, we certainly don’t want to wait until we have these various statements in place before we get to work. The time is now! There are some things that we are obviously *already* about, and there are ministry areas that we can focus on without any worries that we

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might be going in the wrong direction.

To that end, I mentioned last week, a three-fold emphasis that we will be ‘about’ in the coming year (years!) So let me repeat a small portion of what I shared with you last week in that regard:

* a renewed emphasis on personal **discipleship**

We are going to be talking about what that means, what it looks like. We’ll be challenging you to go deeper in your walk with God. We’ll be talking about spiritual disciplines – worship, prayer, fasting, tithing, witness, and service. And we’re going to give you many opportunities and tools to respond as God leads you. We’re going to help you do this.

Second, there will be a renewed emphasis on * **community**.

What does a ‘community of faith’ look like? Who’s invited into this community? How can we practice ‘radical hospitality’ here, like Jesus expressed in his parable of the King’s Wedding Banquet...

And this is not only community ministry to *ourselves*. The things we do to care for *each other* are very important, and we do them with excellence already, and we need to continue that. Things like Heart to Heart, our Stephen Ministries and other pastoral care areas – Martha’s Hands; our Fellowship Groups, for various ages, youth groups, support groups, etc. These are all community oriented.

We need to look at these sorts of things and also ask, “How can reach *new* people, and integrate them into this structure? How can we establish multiple access points *into* this community?” Not expecting people to be ‘*like us*’ but understanding that a community of faith includes believers, and seekers, the curious, as well as the committed. In this community we’re going to be on different points of the road. What would that look like?

A Third Emphasis will be * to move our focus more intentionally to **Service** to those who are outside of this community...

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This one may be the most crucial of all as far as impacting our world... let me share *why* that is. (BTW - I've had *a lot* of response to the message last week, and the one a couple of weeks before that, and the things I'm hearing are not surprising to me at all, but I am nonetheless really blessed to hear so many people engaging with the things that I'm talking about. You are getting this! You understand *why* I'm talking about these things, and you are ready to get to it. This is a very unusual congregation in that regard, and as I say so often, I consider myself incredibly blessed to be serving Christ with you here. but one question that I've heard frequently, among those responses, is 'what can we do to reach this younger generation?'

I hear the concern that is embedded within those questions, because so frequently you are talking about children, grandchildren, neighbors, etc., mostly younger people that have become disillusioned and disconnected from the church, and you hurt for them. Well, I do, too.

And there are no easy answers; don't be fooled by my summary here today! This is a general direction, a taste, and as in many things, God will be in the *details* – most of which have yet to be developed. But I want to give you *some* answer to that heartfelt question, and, again, we'll go from there. And hopefully, you'll find this encouraging.

I wish I had about an hour... but I don't... how about I start here?

Rick Warren spells out a picture of a 'path of discipleship' that perfectly describes the way most churches have visualized their mission for many years. And he puts it in terms of a baseball diamond, which is pretty appropriate for us right now (Go Phillies!)

The First step is to get a person to 'First Base'. This would be a personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ. So, a church's strategy would teach their people how to evangelize, give them tools, etc, and send them out into the world to lead people to the Lord.

Second Base, which is crucial – is to Disciple these new converts. Teach them the basics of our faith, teach them about Jesus, and the "Way".

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Third Base is to get them involved in service – to *do* something in ministry, through use of their spiritual gifts, and an awareness of the needs around us. Then they ‘score’, back home, when **they** find someone to bring into this process, where it starts over.

The problem is the culture has changed, and this model really doesn’t work anymore. There is a huge suspicion concerning the church in our culture, there is a pervasive feeling that we are ‘so heavenly minded that we’re no earthly good’; that all we want to do is ‘convert people’ and if they don’t respond, we move on... a belief that we don’t really care about the world, our community, etc. now, I think that this is a mistaken impression, but what I think doesn’t matter, it is what a lot of people think about us. So we have little credibility to share our faith.

So, what we need to, do then, is to *reverse* this entire process – and this is, basically a summary of the model of church that Ginhamsburg UMC and COR have built their ministries upon. In this **reversal** you start with service. This is where we demonstrate the Gospel to the world. It’s a radical idea, in one sense, and yet it is as old as Jesus! And when I say *we* start with ministry, I mean not only do we *serve* the community, but we also bring people from the community with us into these various areas of service.

“Hey, we’re forming a mission team to go down to Mississippi, there’s still an incredible amount of rebuilding going on there... people are suffering, would you like to come with us?” Or, “We’re going into Camden next Saturday morning, and we’re going to cook breakfast for some people that are having a rough time”... you get the idea... And people will say, “YES” to these invitations. They *will*.

And in doing that they are going to rub shoulders with committed believers, people who are not fitting the stereotype of judgmental Christians that they’ve always held. People who recognize their own faults, and can laugh at themselves, and don’t judge, and people who really **do** care about others.

And some of them are going to be interested in hearing what makes *these* people different? “Tell

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me about your church.” In a very natural way – ‘let’s talk about Jesus’. Which will lead for some, to “First base”... a relationship with Christ. Or, possibly just an invitation to come to church with you... and many will. *That* will lead them – eventually – to Christ.

And then the process will begin again.

Now, when they come, we’re going to be ready for them. We are going to be ‘retooling’ to practice radical hospitality. We’re going to be looking at everything we do – from our facilities, to our ministries, our worship services, our language, to our signs, from the perspective of a guest. We want to convey the truth: we want you here, we care about you, we believe that we all have a deep need in our life for God, and we know we’re not perfect, but we can help you find those answers. We will walk with you.

I’m going to be preaching in series from now on, and at least two of those series’ each year are going to be specifically designed to address issues and questions that nominally religious or non religious people are asking. I’m going to ask *you* to help me there – i.e., I’m going to ask you next month to send me answers to these questions: what would be a topic for a sermon series that you would feel comfortable inviting a non-Christian friend to come and hear? What is an issue that you struggle with personally? What are some Bible questions that you’ve never quite figured out? And I’m going to use this input as a basis for planning our messages for the rest of this year.

These will provide open opportunities for you to get bold and give a personal invitation. To anyone who is interested. To people that are ministering side by side with you at IHN or a mission trip, or whatever...

Another quick word about sermons, including a plea for help. We need to come to grips with the cultural change that has made visualization the *only* way that many people learn (get information) , and a *primary* way that most people learn. I’m going to give you two examples of how we can use video in a minute or two – and also share two ministry *areas* that we’re involved in right now that are very exciting.

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But the first DVD is one that I put together... filmed it, edited it, copied it. Now, I love doing this, but it takes a lot of time. So I'm looking to form a Video Team, who will work with me (and I'm talking 2 – 4 months in advance) to find, create, and imagine how we can illustrate some of my messages with this medium. Give me a call, will you?

I also am going to desperately need a weekend Media Team. People to do what I'm doing myself awkwardly today – cue up DVDs, switch between computers, and other technical stuff. I will train you, but a little professionalism is going to enable our ministry to reach further in every one of our services by doing this better.

Now, finally... examples of outreach ministries (#3 in our priority list).

I have many to share, I only have time for two...How can we reach beyond the walls here?

Well, one couple in our church – John and Karen Simms, found that they had a burden for the marriages of their friends and people in our community. And they knew of a tool – put out by the people who gave us “Alpha” called The Marriage Course... they talked to me, and they ran it in their home last late winter/ spring. We helped some with financing. It was a tremendous labor of love, and was incredibly effective.

Now, they're willing to do it again starting January 8, 2010. And I wanted to promo it. So I asked if any in that first group of couples would be willing to be filmed talking about this course. And – *every one* of them said 'yes'. Only two couples (counting John and Karen, the hosts) were actually from our church. And here's what two of those couples had to say...

Play Marriage Course DVD ...

This is what I'm talking about.

Another thing that we do well, and need to do more of, is getting people involved in missions trips – extended times of service, believers, seekers, shoulder to shoulder. (Third base trips!) These trips are life changing experiences – not only are they blessings to the people that are

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being served, but they are even greater blessings to the people serving.

One mission organization that we've been involved with for quite some time is the Appalachian Service Project. Mostly youth, but a number of adults. And this next DVD shows how important that ministry is – but you'll see too, how what they are talking about here can apply in many ways to *any* mission trip. I was blessed when I first saw this, I know you will be, too.