

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

On Mission

Introduction: About goals...

So, how are you doing with your New Year's resolutions?

It's still January, so I hope that if you determined that this was the year to get in shape, learn a new trick, work hard in school, _____ (fill in the blank), that you're still on track!

Well, not having yet closed the calendar on January, there is still time for us, here at church, to think in terms of resolves - hopes and dreams for 2008.

Far more than embracing vague and fuzzy pipe dreams, though, today we're going to look at biblical goals and a compelling vision for a God-honoring future for our church.

The stewardships of Elders

Each September, the membership of Northwest selects men to serve on the Board of Elders. These men are charged with various responsibilities.

At the present time, the Elders at Northwest are **Rich Bartholomew, Neil Bute, Rick Clayworth, Todd Havekost** and me.

The Board is committed to being a shepherding board. Individual Elders often give shepherding care to people in the church.

The Elder Board also supports the ministries of the church as managers. They give direction. They work with Ministry Coordinators who lead various efforts in the church such as Men's and Women's Ministries.

And there is another thing that the Elder Board does.

Elders and goal-setting

The Elders, especially over the past two to three years, have tried hard to give direction to the church as a whole, to envision our "preferred future" and to set goals for our church.

In November of 2007, the Elders set aside some concerted time for tackling a few big-ticket items, to pray, and to plan for the year in front of us.

For the next few minutes, I'm going to line out for you the goals that the Elders have set forth for Northwest Community Church for 2008.

Now, these are not just goals that the Elders are hoping to accomplish. They are congregational goals!

We are in this together - and the reason I'm bringing this message today is both to let you know what the Elders are envisioning for the coming year AND to invite you to own this vision, yourself.

In what follows, I won't be addressing everything we would long to see accomplished this year.

You'll notice that I won't be mentioning facilities, building programs, or land development. You will be hearing about what has been going on along those lines in the near future. But not today.

I'm also not going to talk about the Free and Clear initiative. Our effort to pay off the mortgage on our building this year is near and dear to my heart. But that is not where this message is going.

When the Elders met in November to consider goals, we gave time to considering, prayerfully and thoughtfully, what would be God-honoring, timely, significant goals for our church for 2008.

We couched this discussion in terms of, "*What would have to happen in our church to allow us to say, at the end of the year, 'This has been a successful and effective, progressive year of ministry at Northwest.'?*"

After a good bit of time in discussion, a discussion punctuated with prayer, we landed on three primary areas where we want to see our church make huge strides this year.

Goal-setting and our Mission Statement

The goals we arrived at - and what I'm going to present this morning - reflect priorities that form the basis of our church's Mission Statement.

The Mission Statement was developed in 1993 by the Elders and was then formally adopted by the congregation a couple of years later.

The Mission Statement makes an appearance on the home page of our web site. You'll find it in our just published Resource Directory. It shows up in lots of other church literature.

The Statement affirms the centrality of Scripture, celebrates the grace of God, and says that life is to be found in relationship.

We start with a Bible verse - Romans 5:8: ***God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.***

Then we continue - *In response to His love, Northwest Community Church seeks to become a community of believers who submit to His inspired Word so that we may passionately pursue life-changing relationships with God, with each other, and with their world.*

With the Mission Statement as background, here are the three goals the Elders have agreed upon, before God, for Northwest. I'm very excited about all three of them. The first goal I'll mention has to do with prayer.

One of our primary goals this year is to press prayer into the life of our church.

Goal One - Pressing Prayer into the Life of Our Church

Nurturing a Relationship with God

Paul's journey

In addressing prayer, we're talking about each one of us nurturing our relationship with God. And in talking about that, we would do well to listen to words from the apostle Paul, from Philippians 3.

Before Paul became a Christian, he had all kinds of things going for him, all kinds of advantages he could have pointed to, as an up-and-coming leader in the Jewish community.

He was a Hebrew of Hebrews, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee of Pharisees.

If anyone thought they had something to boast about before God, Paul could boast more!

He was an upright, moral, purebred Jew - and proud of it.

Then, he became a Christian.

After becoming a Christian, everything changed. His whole understanding of what was important in life changed dramatically.

Listen as he tells us what is important to him now that he has come to know Christ by faith.

Evaluating former gains as losses

[7] But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. [8] More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of KNOWING CHRIST JESUS my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish¹ so that I may gain Christ...

¹ And, he didn't mince words about the choice he has made concerning his life priorities. He called them all "rubbish." The Greek word that we translate *rubbish* in verse 8 is a strong word. It can refer to that which is thrown to the dogs, or to

- and again [10] *THAT I MAY KNOW HIM, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.*

For Paul, knowing Christ - and getting to know Him better - was more important than anything and everything else in the world.

He had had the world on a string as a Pharisee. His career path was straight and level. Advancement was certain.

And, he stood up, turned on his heel, and literally walked away from it all.

Maybe an illustration will help...

Knowing Jesus - knowing like it!

I, for one, love a meal of a hamburger, a Dr. Pepper and fries. I would rarely reject a hamburger as worthless.

BUT, if you were to give me a choice between two meals:

- (1). a hamburger, Dr. Pepper, and fries; OR
- (2). a New York strip steak grilled to medium rare, baked potato with all the fixins, green beans, Texas toast, and cold milk, followed by hot Dutch apple pie topped with Homemade Vanilla Blue Bell ice cream...

...well, I'd judge the hamburger to be rubbish - by comparison.

In comparison to having a growing relationship with Christ, everything else in life is less than a burger and fries. It's dumpster diving.

In these few verses, Paul tells us what it means to do what our church's Mission Statement calls us to do - **passionately pursue a life-changing relationship with God.**

that which is rejected by the body. This means, not only that he thinks those former gains have no value, but that he doesn't live with them constantly on his mind. After all, what normal person spends his time nostalgically dreaming of garbage or manure?

- It means that we consciously shift our dependence from what we can do to what Christ has done and can do in us.
- It means that we nurture an intimacy with Jesus through genuine worship.

Paul, writing these words some thirty years after his conversion, had not arrived. He was still passionately pursuing this relationship with the living Jesus!

So you and I are to continually be engaged in the passionate pursuit of a life-changing relationship with God.

Prayer

Our declaration of dependence

Back in November, the Elders considered how we might move toward becoming the church that the Head of the church - Jesus - would have us become and landed on this.

Along with you, **we want to see prayer pressed into the life of the church more and more deeply** in the months ahead.

I've long been convinced that the best way to demonstrate our commitment to dependence on God is through prayer.

Not that prayer is the only thing. But it is a MAIN thing. Make a list of the three or four or five main things that are distinctively Christian, and prayer makes it to the list.

It is the ultimate act of trust. It is an activity of not doing. Prayer is confessing that God alone is able to do what we are incapable of doing and what we are most concerned to see happen.

Prayer is our declaration of dependence.

Pressing prayer into our life together

Already, there are a number of ways for you and me to grow in prayer here at Northwest.

- We hold a Tuesday evening prayer meeting where we really pray - you could attend this when you are able, for however long you are available.
- I sent out emails on Tuesday containing the prayer requests that are distributed on Tuesday evenings to those who are not able to attend the meetings, but will commit to pray for the requests - ask me and I'll be happy to send them to YOU.
- There is an email prayer chain - join, and get regular updated requests about needs your brothers and sisters have here.

And some of the initiatives that are being discussed and considered for the months ahead include the following:

- Three sermons after I come back from Russia - to get or to keep prayer at the forefront of our minds;
- Concerts of prayer - 2-3 times this year;
- Prayer in worship services - more regularly;
- Fasting - introduce this discipline;
- Half days of prayer; prayer retreat - at another location or on the twelve acres.

These and dozens of other ways are under consideration for pressing prayer into the life of our church. But one of the things we are concerned to say is that one of the things we do here at Northwest is pray.

Sometimes we pray when we're alone. Sometimes we pray when we are together. But we are going to be all about developing a church with a maturing ministry of prayer.

A second primary goal set out by the Elders is a commitment to create a culture where love thrives.

Two - Creating a Culture Where Love Thrives

Community

Our Mission Statement says that we want to be a community of believers who **passionately pursue life-changing relationships with each other.**

When writing to the believers in the church at Colossae, Paul addressed himself to life in the church in terms that hint at a passionate pursuit.

[Colossians 3:12] So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; [13] bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. [14] Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity...16] Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing² one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

There is so much in that passage!

Notice that he mentions forgiveness. If we would be the church, relationally, we are meant to be, we'll forgive each other.

If you hang around here (or any other church for that matter) for long, somebody is going to rub you the wrong way, make a decision you disagree with, be insensitive, yell at your kids - do something that offends or hurts you.

When that happens, here is what you are to do - apply Colossians 3:13 liberally to your own heart. Remember and reflect on the great forgiveness Jesus has lavished on you, and forgive them.

Now, that doesn't mean that you don't deal with the issue!

No, we don't drop the matter. We pursue it and we engage with the person. But we leave the baggage behind.

That's what admonishment and teaching is all about. And then, in between these commands to forgive and to engage Paul provides the hinge upon which deep community swings - LOVE.

² "Admonish" is a strong word, which, when applied, might look a lot like reproof, scolding, rebuke - even discipline. And because of this flavor, it may break the mold of what many of us think of as "love."

Jesus taught that the two most important commandments God ever gave were to love Him and to love others (Matthew 22:37-39).

He also said that when we love each other, two things will happen. One, the world will know that we are His disciples (John 13:34-35). Two, the world will know that the Father sent Him! (John 17:23)

So love is the ultimate apologetic the church can give to the watching world of the truth of Christianity!

In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul tells us that eloquence, knowledge, faith, generosity, and self-sacrifice are worthless if they are not energized by love.

When **LOVE** is sandwiched between **FORGIVENESS** and meaningful **ENGAGEMENT** in a church, that church is going to give a powerful testimony for Jesus!

That is the kind of church we intend to be. **LOVING** is the biggest part of what we mean when we say that we are committed to the passionate pursuit of life-changing relationships with each other.

We envision becoming a church where you are loved and where you love, where you can know and be known.

There are a number of venues already in place where you can build loving relationships with others here.

Pathways to Community

Pathways already in place

- Care Groups and youth small groups - contact Rich Bartholomew (adults) or Tadd Chapman (youth)
- Men's and Women's Bible studies - check the program for opportunities
- Ministry teams - check the program; great way to develop relationships is through service - join a team where you have interest
- Women's Interface - contact Chris Laughlin
- Time between services; Community Blend; Hospitality Center; greeting time in the service - take advantage of every opportunity

New Pathways to be put in place

New pathways are being considered, including things like "Dinners for 8" - where adults get together over a meal to forge relationships; adding new Care Groups; and initiating a project to foster Servanthood - and more!

Beyond structural pathways and programs that will help foster loving relationships, much of our "success" in the coming year in this arena will be determined by how awake and alert you and I are to the opportunities and open doors in front of us.

- Won't you consider asking the Lord to point you toward someone (or two or three people) who could benefit from your love?
- Would you pray that God would open your eyes to a brother or sister with whom you could meet regularly for spiritual growth?
- Would you look for someone you could lovingly mentor?
- Would you commit to taking existing relationships deeper than they currently are?

The one verse description of the early church looks so compelling. It's a church that was focused on the essentials, relationally.

[Acts 2:42] They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Creating a culture at Northwest where love thrives. This is what we are trusting God to help us all develop, as we depend on Him.

And one more goal...

Three - Effective Evangelism

On Being Salt and Light

In The Greatest Sermon Ever Preached (The Sermon on the Mount), Jesus told us that His followers are **salt** and **light**.

We are the **salt** of the earth, bringing a God-seasoning to life and whetting the appetites of people all around us for Jesus' living water.

We are the **light** of the world, shining - not putting our light under a bushel - so that those who watch and interact with us will see Jesus, the light of the world, through us.

Of course, here we are talking about how we are going to serve those who are outside the faith and introduce them to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Elders have set forth a vision and a goal that our church would become much more effective this year when it comes to evangelism.

Now, at Northwest, we are already engaged with our world in a variety of ways. One is through Missions.

Outreach at Northwest

Missions

In the business world, it is standard operating procedure to make gains in the marketplace by the principle: **use other people's money first!**

We apply that principle when it comes to outreach here at Northwest by supporting a tremendous team of missionaries.³

They are listed in your resource directory. They serve the Lord in India, China, Morocco, Israel and in other places that are, to us, among the more remote parts of the world. (see Acts 1:8)

In some cases we reach out by way of strategic partnerships (i.e. - Montevideo, Uruguay; Vista Community Church, San Antonio). Some of our team serves right here in the northwest part of our city (LeRoy Jacobson with Youth for Christ).

***If you would like to join the Missions Committee, I'm confident that you'd be welcomed with open arms! Just talk with Todd Havekost.

So, through our prayers and through our financial contribution, we are reaching out.

³ The Apostle Paul commended this mindset when he asked churches to support him on his various missionary ventures.

But we are also reaching out and seeking to serve, in a more hands-on way, through our Local Outreach Team.

The Local Outreach Team

This team is led by Tadd Chapman. Serving with Tadd are Neil Bute, Nick Caruso, and Beverly Doroh. I serve on the team, too.

To this point, rather than initiating outreach events or efforts, the Local Outreach Team has been working to identify and then to support those in our church who are already serving those who are outside of our church, and likely, outside of our faith.⁴

This is from Tadd. If you are serving in some way outside the four walls of our church in what you consider to be an outreach type of ministry, please let someone on the Local Outreach Team know.

Any one of us on the team would be happy to pray for you and to help you find the resources you need to make your service more effective.

Now, the Local Outreach Team has divided "local outreach" into four categories.

There is, first, **CRISIS HELP**.

Associated with this kind of ministry would be things like the aid we provided for Hurricane Katrina refugees from New Orleans, or our help to families from our community who have benefited by the Benevolence Fund and Food Pantry.

Then, there is **SERVICE**.

We have helped the Battered Women's and Children's Shelter and Habitat for Humanity. Hosea Maggard provides regular assistance to the homeless population.

By intervening when there is a **crisis** or by **servicing** people in need in Jesus' Name, we are being salt and light.

⁴ The Advent service where we put together supplies and made pillows for the Battered Women's and Children's Shelter is a good example of how the Team has been working to this point.

When we do this, we are also being obedient to the Bible's command that we help people. Paul writes, *[Titus 3:14] Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs so that they will not be unfruitful.*

Then, there is **EDUCATION**.

On the one hand, we can become better educated about the world in which we live and be better equipped to relate to those who have not yet come to know Jesus.

On the other hand, we can offer educational tools to our surrounding community that will help them - like the Dave Ramsey **Financial Peace University** or the upcoming **Love and Respect** marriage seminar.

The fourth element of Local Outreach is - **EVANGELISM**. By the term "evangelism" we mean *sharing the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit, with people who are far from God, in hopes of introducing them to the Lord Jesus Christ.*

I've been thinking a lot about evangelism lately.

I have become convinced that evangelizing effectively will require prayerful preparation, careful thought, and risky action. Perhaps even repentance...

Evangelism

Albuquerque, New Mexico

I was in Albuquerque much of this week at a conference for pastors put on by the EFCA to consider what is being referred to as "the emergent (or emerging) church."

The emergent church is not a well-defined movement at this point. It is still evolving. Some of it is very healthy and some of it is not.

Some who would self-identify as "emergent" are just trying to make the church and its presentation more relevant to current culture. That's a good thing.

Others in the movement are attempting more of a wholesale reconstruction of forms by which to present the old true Gospel. That can be helpful, too.

But there are others who call themselves "emergent" who are actually revising the nature of the Gospel itself so as to fit into the culture. That's not OK.

The best of the movement reminds me of missionaries who use the culture of the people they are trying to reach (contextualization), while remaining true to Scripture.

Don Richardson did this in his missionary efforts in the 50's and 60's to reach cannibals in New Guinea. His efforts are recorded in such books as Peace Child and Eternity in Their Hearts.

We applaud such efforts, as long as the missionaries don't abandon the Gospel they are representing.

Some in the emergent church have, it seems, done this. In their zeal to reach the culture, they have abandoned Christian distinctives.

And this is one of the huge challenges to effective evangelism, as I see it.

On the one side there is the danger that a Christian or a church will not contextualize at all. They will be biblically accurate, but not culturally relevant. This will lead to little receptivity by the culture.

On the other side is the danger that a Christian or a church will over-contextualize, losing biblical fidelity, the result being compromise.

Every missionary, every Christian, and every church has to find the way between these two dangers: irrelevance and syncretism.

We are to be biblically faithful and culturally relevant.

It is easy to be biblically faithful if you don't care about being culturally relevant. It's easy to be culturally relevant if you don't care much about being biblically faithful.

What's tough is to be both biblically faithful AND culturally relevant.

To become a people who are effective at evangelism, we're going to have to think hard about how to go about it. We're going to have to think like missionaries!

And we should know that we're going to the plate with two strikes against us. Many people today who are outside the church have problems with Christians.

unChristian

I've been reading a ground-breaking book by David Kinnaman, who is the President of The Barna Group (a research company, similar to Gallup). The book is called, simply, unChristian.

The book distills a massive amount of research done among 16-29 year old Americans and their perception of Christians. This is important to consider when thinking about evangelism.

In the minds of the "average" American teen and young adult, you and I:
 hate homosexuals (91% of young Americans);
 are judgmental (87%) and hypocritical (85%);
 are old fashioned (out of touch with reality), too political, not accepting of others who are different from us (either lifestyle or faith), and are hypercritical.

Whew!

Granted, many will stumble over the cross of Jesus. Tragically, many today are stumbling over Christians before they ever get to the cross!

For Northwest

With this cultural context in mind (we are missionaries; we are perceived as unattractive), we cannot ignore the biblical call to take the Gospel to our friends and neighbors and co-workers and neighbors.

And in fact, that's what we all want to do. Don't we all want to see people we love come to know our Savior? Of course we do!

It is going to be our hope, prayer, passion and goal to see us move forward this year in evangelistic effectiveness.

I don't believe that we'll ever be highly programmatic in our evangelistic efforts here. After all, we believe that life is all about relationships - with God, with each other, and with people outside the faith.

But we may well experiment with all kinds of things. We'll be encouraging all the ministries and every person to have evangelism on their radars.

Oh how we long to see people come to faith in Jesus! I thank God for those of you here who have come to know Christ recently. And I can think of nothing more exciting than to see more and more men and women and young people and children placing their trust in Jesus for salvation.

Conclusion:

So that's it. This is where we're heading in the year in front of us.

Pressing prayer more and more deeply into the life of our church. Creating a culture where genuine love flows. Becoming more effective in evangelism.

If we could get to the end of 2008 and say, "We're more marked by prayer; love has grown here; we're sharing the Gospel" - I know that I, for one, would shout Hallelujah!

May God be glorified as we follow Him into the passionate pursuit of life-changing relationships with Himself, with each other, and with our world.