

“Living into God’s Future for the Church”

A) A Beautiful Vision

What does it mean to have God’s vision? To see and work towards a the future that God has destined for us?

Nobody would ever accuse the prophet Isaiah of being optimistic. Unfortunately, the prophet was the chosen messenger to give visions of God’s punishment to Israel for her unfaithfulness. Although we get a few uplifting passages that point to the coming of Christ, and we are told that God would eventually redeem Israel out of her suffering, it is mostly bad news. However, Isaiah 2 has one of the most beautiful visions of God’s future for the world in all of Scripture. In it, we see all peoples in the world once separated by geography, culture, language, and all other manners of barriers are together hiking to the mountain of God to worship. We live in an age of **significant division**, in our world, in our country, in our community, in our churches, and in our families, and so the picture of the unity of people once divided before God is so beautiful.

But what gets me excited about this vision is not only the beauty of the end result, but that God has called us to be a part of enacting this vision here and now. The Kingdom of God is coming. We know that it is not yet fully here because we still live in a world filled with pain and hurt. But Jesus also tells us in **Mark 1:15**: *“The time promised by God has come at last!” he announced. “The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!”* The Kingdom was near to Jesus’ listeners because Jesus was near. When Jesus ascended back into heaven, he commissioned His followers to continue the good work of the Kingdom that He began; the world may still be broken, but everyday through the lives of faithful Christians it looks more and more like the Kingdom. And we get to participate in that same work.

As we live in that ‘not yet’ time, waiting to finally stand at the foot of God’s mountain but still living in the broken world, how will we as the Family of God live into Isaiah’s final vision for the world?

We spent the beginning part of this year considering what it means to be the Family of God on mission together and considered God’s mission for the church to share the Gospel of salvation and make disciples. This mission can be lived out in different ways by different people and different churches depending on the people and the context. This morning, I’m going to share a vision of what I believe to be where God has been leading us as a congregation in carrying out His mission to the world. This comes from my 9.5 years of living in, working with, and observing Oak Grove and the journey that she has been on. In some ways, it captures where we have already been heading. In other ways, it takes steps toward carrying out the content of conversations we’ve been having for years. It would be easy for us to rest on the laurels of the good things that we have done in the past, or to be comfortable with the current number of attendees that we have, or to congratulate ourselves on being able to balance the budget and still be generous. It would be easy, but it wouldn’t be faithful to God’s calling for us and it wouldn’t bear fruit.

Transition:

This morning we are going to consider a vision for the church that includes **3 Core Values** and **4 Essential Areas** of our life together. The three core values are Missional, Discipleship, and Leadership. The 4 essential areas are Discipleship, Mission, Worship, and Community. They are centered around Christ and answer the question, who is God calling us to be together?

B) 3 Core Values and Questions**a. Missional****b. Discipleship****c. Leadership Development**

With each of these values there is a clarifying question that helps to define the value and should be asked to help us better evaluate whether or not we are living fully into who God is calling us to be together.

a. Missional: *Are we living like Christ?* When we look at our lives and work together as a church, we should ask, is this an opportunity to be the hands and feet of Jesus? Is this encouraging us to exemplify Jesus?

b. Discipleship: *Are we growing more like Christ?* When we look at our committees, at our events, at our worship, Sunday School and the like, we should be asking, do these things lead us to become more like Jesus Christ?

Jesus' final words to his disciples before leaving earth was to commend them to make disciples. **Matthew 28:** ¹⁹ *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*

Disciplemaking is an indispensable part of what it means to be a Christian.

c. Leadership: *Are we developing leaders?* Are we finding and encouraging the God-given potential in each of us to be a leader in the church? For those currently in leadership, are we creating leaders to replace us?

There are many **examples in Scripture** of leaders who raised up other leaders to follow after them.

Moses and Joshua

Eli and Samuel

Jesus and Peter

Paul and Timothy

Transition: So, three core values of Oak Grove are Missional, Discipleship, and Leadership Development which ask the questions "Are we living like Christ, are we becoming like Christ, and are we developing leaders?" Next, we are going to look at 4 Essential Areas of our life together as a congregation and how everything we do fit into one of those areas.

C) 4 Essential Areas of Our Life Together

Our vision statement, the acronym “SHARE” *which I dare anyone here to recite without looking at the back of the bulletin*, attempts to capture what is most important to our lives and work together. Although I’m not convinced that having a ‘vision statement’ has done us much good, as it is not something most are familiar with, I think there is something important about distilling all of the things that we do together down to what is most essential to who we are.

For me, as I thought about the life and culture of our congregation, what we do together, and what is most important to us, I believe that we can put everything under **4 essential areas** in our life together. Let’s consider these **4 Essential Areas**, which programs and events fall under each area, and how God might be growing us in each of these areas when we look at them through the lens of the **3 Core Values**. You will notice that two of them, discipleship and mission, are also part of the 3 questions. This is intentional. They serve not only as questions that should be asked related to all areas of our work and life together, but they also represent specific things that we do in the life of the church.

i. Discipleship: Growing more and more like Jesus.

- Missional Discipleship Groups
- Sunday School
- Small Groups
- Weekly Bible Study Weekly Prayer Gatherings
- Vacation Bible School
- MYF/JYF
- Mentoring

ii. Mission: Reaching out into our community and the world around us.

- B.E.L.L.S
- Bless WL-S
- West Liberty Cares Food Pantry
- West Liberty Cares Emergency Fund
- Blessing Bags
- Outreach Committee Initiatives
- Vacation Bible School
- Harvest Offering
- Summer Mission Trip(s)
- Financial/Prayer support of missionaries/mission agencies

iii. Worship: Gathering to praise God through Scripture, through music, through testimony and through exploring the Word.

- Sunday Morning Service
- Special Holiday Services
- A place to display talents
- A place to develop skills

iv. Community: These are the ways in which we care for one another within the body of Christ.

- Mutual care
- Yearly Retreat
- Fellowship Events
- Sunday School
- Meal Train
- Visitation Ministry
- Legacy Builder Breakfast
- Nurture/Care Initiatives
- College/Camp Scholarships

D) A New Kind of Measurement

How do we know that we are living faithfully and bearing fruit as the church together? For a long time, the standard measurement for a successful church has lay in numbers. How many people are attending our service on an average Sunday, and how much money is being given to meet the budget? As an elder group, we have spent several years wrestling with the question of measurement: ***how do we know that we are doing what we are supposed to be doing?*** We have been feeling that we need to move away from the questions of numbers: attendance numbers, membership numbers, and budgetary numbers. We recognize that those are tangible measurements, that there is some value to them, and that they are an undeniable fact of our lives together. But they are not measurements of faithfulness and fruitfulness.

Instead, we should measure our fruitfulness and faithfulness as a congregation by asking ourselves these questions:

- a. Are we growing more and more like Christ together? **(Discipleship)**
- b. Are we living out our faith in the neighborhoods we live in, the places we work, and the places we play? **(Missional)**
- c. Are we creating and developing leaders who look like and live like Christ?
(Leadership)

If we can answer “yes” to these questions, or at the very least answer “we are trying our best,” or “we have a plan in place,” then I think we can know we are being faithful and fruitful, in spite of whatever numbers might be telling us.

So, how can we continue to grow and push ourselves in each of the 4 essential areas of our church life together so that we are being fruitful and faithful? We need to look at each area through the lens of the 3 Core Values and ask of each area the 3 questions. In our Worship together, are we living like Christ, are we growing more like Christ, and are we developing leaders? In our Community life, are we living like Christ, are we growing more like Christ, and are we developing leaders? In our Mission and Discipleship efforts, are we living like Christ, are we growing more like Christ, and are we developing leaders.

If we hope to continue down the road that God has set before us and to intentionally avoid becoming stagnant, we need to regularly ask ourselves these questions. And as we ask ourselves these questions, if the answer is “No” or “I’m not sure,” then we need to find ways to begin answering “Yes!”

And all of this must begin by being rooted firmly in Jesus Christ. Jesus says in **John 15:4** “Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.”

E) Practically, what does this look like?

Discipleship:

Work at creating an intentional path for people from the time that they enter the doors as visitors to engaging along with us in Discipleship training through Sunday School and Missional Discipleship Groups.

Specifically, we will continue to focus on Missional Discipleship Groups and ask the question “What does it mean to be ‘disciples who make disciples?’” The ultimate goal for all of us would be not only are we growing through participation in these groups, but that we would each be creating disciples. If we believe the Great Commission to be true, and it is, then who is discipling us and who are we disciplining?

This would then include developing new Missional Discipleship Group leaders and forming New Missional Discipleship Groups. If we are not already, we should view these groups as the discipleship building blocks to who we are as a church together.

Missional:

Discover, assess, and empower our passions. What are your passions for the community? Do you have a heart for children, or for married couples, or for the elderly, or singles, or people who are in poverty, or addicted? Do you like to play basketball, grill-out, go camping, or hiking, or scrapbooking? How can God use your passions for the sake of the Gospel? How can church leadership equip and empower you to be a missionary in that area?

Right now, one significant need in our community that we are addressing is hunger. We do this through our work with the Food Pantry and Blessing Bags. Unfortunately, hunger is a great need in our area; how could we become a significant player in fighting hunger in our community? Are there any other areas of the population whose needs aren’t getting met?

Re-assess the ministry of the Grove. If it is our tangible presence in the West Liberty community, what kind of presence do we want to have there?

Along with this, we need to find ways to share our personal missional stories. How have you shared the love of Jesus with those around you this last week. My mom and dad are wonderful examples of a couple with a missional heart for their neighbors. Last week it was their neighbor’s birthday; it also happened to be the two year anniversary of his wife’s death. So my

mom decided to bake him a cake. It was a very simple gesture that came from a place of understanding Jesus' call to love our neighbors. I know that many of you have stories like this. We need to continue to find ways to share our stories as examples and encouragement.

Leadership:

Finally, we need to become leaders who develop leaders; rather than using people in positions in the church as long as they are willing to, and then when they leave suffering through a leadership vacuum, have leaders who are actively developing the persons who will be replacing them.

This also means recognizing the valuable unpaid leadership within the church and empowering, encouraging, and lifting up those persons in the same way that we do for paid pastors. Jerry and Roxanne and Joel Kauffman have been serving the Junior High Youth ministry for many many years in the same way that I worked with the high schoolers. One of the reasons that we've had such success with our MYF group is because of the work that they've done with the JYF. We've never officially called them 'pastors,' but in many ways they have functioned as youth pastors. Are there things that we could be doing with our people already in leadership to encourage and equip them and acknowledge their hard work?

God is working in and through Oak Grove and will continue to work in and through Oak Grove. This is an incredible group of people with many gifts, skills, and passions, and if we work together, giving value to Missional work, to Discipleship growth, and to leadership development, we will be proven faithful and fruitful followers, taking part in the present Kingdom that invites all persons to stream to the mountain of God.