

"IS OUR VISION ANY CLEARER?"

Matthew 28:18-20

Maybe you have heard this before so if you have, please, just patronize me for a few moments, and if you haven't, please be enlightened.

They say that if you put a frog into a pot of boiling water, it will leap out right away to escape the danger. **But**, if you put a frog in a kettle that is filled with water that is cool and pleasant, and then you *gradually* heat the kettle until it starts boiling, the frog will not become aware of the threat until it is too late and boils to death. The frog's survival instincts are geared towards detecting sudden changes.

This is a story that is used to illustrate how people might get themselves into terrible trouble. This parable is often used to illustrate how humans have to be careful to watch slowly changing trends in the environment, not just the sudden changes. It is a warning to keep us paying attention not just to obvious threats but to more slowly developing ones.

It is a story for the Church who, over the years, can become lulled into complacency and not make the appropriate changes until it is too late. The frog and the church....

As most of you know, this past summer we began our work with a church consulting firm from Corunna, Indiana. The firm is Church Doctor Ministries and the consultant who has been working with us ever since and founder of the organization is Dr. Ken Hunter, who came highly recommended and has consulted with over 1,500 churches. To sum up where we are as of today- Dr. Hunter made 143 recommendations and our church leadership wrote 50 Consultation Action Plans. Now all 50 recommendations will and many are being addressed, but a few Saturdays ago, Saturday March 28th to be exact, leaders from our church gathered to select the top recommendations that we felt were our immediate priorities, and we have **8 areas of priority** with **13 areas of concentration** that I would like to highlight for you today.

Back in 1993, author, church consultant and Christian futurist, William Easum, Senior Managing Partner of Easum, Bandy and Associates, wrote a book entitled, *Dancing with Dinosaurs, Ministry in a Hostile and Hurting World*. The book challenges Christians and the Church to wake up and begin to realize that much of their activity is no longer working, and that what we have been taught about ministry no longer makes sense in a world where many see the church and maybe even Christianity irrelevant. He contended back then and still does today that if we continuously fail to prepare our message for an anti-Christian world, we will disappear like the dinosaurs. He argues that while the substance of the gospel will not be changed as we make this shift, we must change the way that we package and proclaim the substance of the gospel. In chapter 8 he highlights three essential ingredients for the church. He says that, **1) Biblical Integrity is Everything, 2) Evangelism is Everything and 3) Quality is Paramount**. It is to his #2, "Evangelism is Everything" that leads into the

First Priority: Evangelism. We, in the mainline churches have shied away from even using the "E" word because we didn't want to offend anyone or seem to have the "right way" so as to turn someone off. Friends, we just celebrated Easter last Sunday and either Jesus is a liar or He is the Son of God who came to take away the sins of the world and, as Jesus said in John 12:32, "And when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." The question is do we desire other people to come to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior or not? Evangelism used to be a mainstay in the Presbyterian Church but it got left in the dust along the way. We need to reclaim evangelism in our church and churches because, if we do not, "the moment a congregation ceases to expand itself on behalf of the spiritual and physical redemption to those around them, it ceases to be the Body of Christ and becomes like the ingrown religious crowd in the Old and New Testaments." (*Dancing with Dinosaurs*, William Easum, p. 108) Under Evangelism we have highlighted 2 areas of concentration: 1) **Provide a**

class on Evangelism. Over the past few weeks Keith Morgenstern has been advertizing a study entitled, *Just Walk Across the Room*, by Bill Hybels of the Willow Creek Church. There are small groups that will be discussing the book, which is a study on Evangelism during the week and then, beginning Sunday, May 3, I will be preaching a series on what we have been studying. If you haven't already, please sign up for one of the groups that meet during the week or come to the Sunday school class. Second area under Evangelism- Develop **a Strategy for Neighborhood Outreach.** We have already been doing this for the past umpteen years through our Food Pantry ministry (prayer ministry), through Hope Day Care, and more recently through the Walk-In-Meals and the Concert-In-The-Lot. Not to mention the youth ministry through our Director of Youth Ministries, Ryan Lawrence, and Summer's Best Two Weeks that reaches out to suburban and urban youth. But what has come out of our study is the idea of an Urban Missionary.

The Evangelism Sub-team will be doing a study and reviewing existing urban ministry programs in our area and Detroit Presbytery of our denomination.

Second Priority: Christian Growth and Development. Our

Christian Growth and Development Ministry Team has set two areas of concentration: 1) **Seventy Days of Vision** with the study of the book

Discover Your Windows and sermons preached on the 10 important Biblical

World Views. If you have been with us for the 10 weeks prior to Easter we

have already addressed the first of this area of concentration and just today,

there was a special Sunday School class to wrap up this all important study.

2) **Small Groups.** Friends, some 85 people were involved in the *Seventy*

Days of Vision study and last year at the same time during the Lenten

Season, instead of having a program here at the church on the Wednesdays

of Lent we began to meet in homes and at the church in small group studies.

It is a proven fact- the way to grow a church is through small groups.

Holding them in people's homes where they then, can invited their un-churched neighbors and sensitively introduce them to other believers away from the church, providing the vehicle for them to know other believers and then eventually invite them one Sunday morning is the way to go. This is the way for people to get to know one another in our relationally deprived yet relationally hungry society. And guess what, this is a form of the "E" word, Evangelism where we have the opportunity to do what our scripture passage says, namely, Make Disciples- which is the purpose of the church.

Third Priority: Deacons and the First Caring Friends Ministry

Team. The one area of concentration that they want to address is **The Stephen Ministry.** With this ministry, trained volunteers from our church would minister one-on-one with people who have needs. The needs might be the recent death of a loved one or friend, illness, emotional issues, and you can fill in the blanks. There would be required 50 hours of training for

those who desire to be Stephen Ministers. This is a nationally known program and many churches in our area are involved in a Stephen Ministry.

Fourth Priority: Deacons and the Community Ministry/Mission

Team. There are two areas of concentration: 1) **Summer's Best Two**

Weeks. This program has been in existence since 1966, that's 43 years, since it was first conceived by Rev. Jim Welch at the Fox Chapel Presbyterian Church outside of Pittsburgh. We have been holding a satellite camp for 9, going on 10 years. This Christian sports camp that seeks to build Christian character through competitive athletics has reached out to suburban and urban youth alike, as a result of our church's ministry, and we continue to see the fruits of this ministry as young people come for the two week camp, then make their way into the youth ministry and then become a part of the life and ministry of our church. We want to continue to expanding this ministry. 2) **Walk-In-Meals.** It was our youth who got us into this program.

For as long as I have been here and that is 15 years, we have sent our youth, Middle schoolers and Senior High youth on summer mission work camps. Trips to inner city Chicago, Philadelphia, Rochester, NY, the north side of Pittsburgh, and Kenmore have opened up the eyes of our youth to the needs of needy people. After one of these mission work camps youth came back and said, we need to feed the poor in our area and so they began with the 4th Sunday night. And then the adults said, we need to follow the example of our youth and they took the second Sunday night. And then I talked to Rita Vincent, our Director of Emergency Assistance and we talked about other churches getting involved and she gave me the green light to speak with suburban pastor friends and Westminster Presbyterian Church has the 1st Sunday night and Oak Hill Presbyterian Church has the 5th Sunday night. But as of recent we don't just feed them physical food but spiritual food as well.

We have a prayer room for people to have prayer and instead of people lining up and getting their food, we now have them sit at the tables and a 5-10 minutes "Spiritual Moment" finds people sharing a Biblical message, Biblical story to give the spiritual food before the physical food. We need to tell them in whose name we do what we do- and His name is Jesus Christ. We want to continue to expand on this ministry.

Fifth Priority: First Contact Ministry Team. The one area of concentration is **Develop a new logo.** One of Dr. Hunter's recommendations was, (quote) "you not use your building as a logo, but design an artistic ministry reflection that identifies key elements of the mission of the church and the love you extend to other people." (end quote) There will be an effort to involve the youth and young people in this endeavor and to look at developing logos for other ministries of the church.

Sixth Priority: Stewardship and Finance Team. There is only one area of concentration and that is **Financial Peace University.**

One of Dr. Hunter's recommendations is to teach Biblically based classes from Financial Peace University and Dave Ramsey. This is a life-changing program that teaches you how to make the right decisions with your money.

Posted on the web-site is the following, "You'll be empowered with the practical skills and confidence needed to achieve your financial goals and experience true financial peace! Dave Ramsey is a successful author, radio show host and personal money management expert." According to his website, more than 450,000 families have attended Ramsey's Financial Peace University classes. Not only have thousands attended the classes, but they've achieved results. The ministry team is working on ways to educate not only the congregation in Biblical stewardship but those outside the walls of the church who need help in getting their personal finances under control as it is reported that 7 out of 10 people in America, and that means in the pews as well, are living pay-check to pay-check and over 35% of Christian marriages end in divorce, and money problems are the number one cause.

The program is a **biblically based accountability curriculum** that will teach people to manage God's money and resources in a godly way. Come this Thursday night at 8:00 p.m. in our sanctuary to TOWN HALL FOR HOPE and hear Dave Ramsey, first hand.

Seventh Priority: Worship Team. There are two areas of concentration: 1) **Use Church Widows software (or some other church-administrative software.** This type of software would make it easier to track our membership, their interests, gifts, abilities, not to mention weekly giving and a host of other time-saving tools. 2) **Second Worship Service.** Several years ago I, along with the Worship Team and Session decided to experiment and hold a second worship service on Sunday nights, known as "The Well." We did this for two years, not holding the service during the summer months- this experiment ceased a few years ago. We also moved from a traditional music worship service to a blended music service on Sunday mornings. From my perspective this was the "win-win" to have the

best of both worlds and keeping us together. But I know there are those who still are not happy. They would like to keep the music separate.

One of Dr. Hunter's recommendations reads as follows: "The church has a blended worship service. This is not a growth engine but a holding tank for present members. It will attract a few others but will not become a growth engine. I recommend you stylize your worship to be totally traditional. I recommend you add a contemporary worship service at a second time. I recommend you make that contemporary service, with the use of electric guitars and drums, and provide this as a growth engine. I recommend you help newcomers and most people in our visually-oriented society to enhance their worship by providing a projection screen with visual guidance for the worship. I recommend you utilize moving visuals and drama for the contemporary service." A Second Worship Service Sub-team has been meeting weekly to explore and work on this recommendation. As this develops, you will be kept informed.

And finally, **Eighth Priority: Relocation Sub-team.** The two areas of concentration are: 1) **Evaluate the current building issues** and 2)

Discuss Partnerships/Relocation. There is a lot that could be said on this Priority but let me say that I invite you next Sunday to a special worship service where, as the people of God, we will be addressing this issue. I hope and pray you will make every effort to attend at 10:45 a.m. in the fellowship hall.

It has been said, "If churches only improve what they have been doing, they will die." Friends, I did not start my ministry at this church 15 years ago on April 13th with the idea that I was going to bury a church. With God's help, with the power of the Holy Spirit, with your help, working together as the people of God, we will not be a church trying to survive but rather a church seeking to thrive for the glory of Jesus Christ and His kingdom. Join me in fellowship hall next Sunday at 10:45 a.m. Amen.