

CHRIST HAS CALLED EDCC...
To Renew and Equip for Mission and Ministry in the World
January 30, 2011

In another Christian denomination with a different hierarchy than our own, a Bishop sent a young pastor to a vacant parish to preach a trial sermon to see if the congregation would be amenable to his employment. Before he sent the young pastor out, the Bishop coached him that his mission in his sermon was to soothe, to move, and to satisfy the congregation with a powerful message that shared God's Word.

The Monday after the trial sermon was preached, the Bishop followed up with the young pastor, asking him if he had soothed, moved, and satisfied the congregation.

The young preacher responded, "I must have soothed them, for a number of people went to sleep as I was speaking. I believe that I also moved them, for I saw several persons get up and walk out during the sermon. And I must have satisfied them, for when the treasurer handed me a check to cover honorarium and expenses, he told me that I had done more than enough and need not return." *Leaves from the Dean's Joke Book. E. E. Flack, CSS Publishing Co., Inc., 1971—on esermons.com/mission*

In our scripture reading today, the Apostle Paul was essentially acting as Bishop and coach for a young pastor-in-training by the name of Timothy, both of whom hoped for different results from the neophyte preacher in the illustration. Paul's two letters are written pep-talks to help guide Timothy to be clear in his message and his mission on behalf of Jesus Christ.

Did you hear the passion in Paul's heart in this morning's text about the message he and Timothy both were called to share? "Jesus is the Son of the God who gives life to all things, the King of kings and Lord of Lords, who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To God be honor and eternal dominion." He even ends it with an *Amen!* so that everyone knows it's the first and last word.

Then Paul gave Timothy a mission-target community—one that included people of means—people who had material wealth, but who were poor in spirit; that is, who needed to be shown a joy that supersedes what the world can give.

Finally, Paul gave him a method: first, show them how to live by the example of your own life as you, Timothy, aim for righteousness and godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, and gentleness. In addition, Paul encouraged Timothy to help his community discover that true joy can be found when they do good for others, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous.

Paul's guidance to Timothy is guidance for us, too. Contemporary culture is becoming increasingly like the culture in which Paul and Timothy lived out their callings—an open expanse of possibility with people who have never really heard or understood the message of Jesus Christ.

I know we've explored the sea-change of society that we're all experiencing as church people in other sermons that Nathan and I have preached. Those of you who are a little more senior in the congregation certainly feel it in your own lives as you look around and you shake your head that things just aren't the same as they used to be.

The pews are not filled with as many people. Some of you have children and grandchildren who don't go to church at all because it just doesn't seem relevant or important. Others of you have kids and grandkids who attend services at other times of the week than Sunday morning because soccer matches and little league games, scout campouts and cheerleading practices are scheduled during what used to be the Holiest hours of the week.

Things have changed and are changing, just like they always have, but for some reason, it really feels like the rate of change is growing more rapid. Blame it on technology, or whatever, but the impact on our lives is to discombobulate the status quo, and here we are today.

The church is not the only place experiencing these changes. The Corporate world has felt it—the long-time economic “rules of the game” just aren't

working anymore—just sit in with our Foundation board meetings with our Merrill Lynch advisors and you hear that.

Education just isn't the same anymore, either. Those of you who are long-time teachers shake your head at how much has changed in the field since you first got your teaching certificate.

Do you wonder why we are so polarized in our discourse across the party aisles in Austin and Washington, even though we tried sitting together during the State of the Union? Because the bedrock of democracy is feeling the changes, too, and everybody is trying to surf the wave of the unknown future. Where are we going? What's it going to look like?

It's in especially these times that the Word of God is needed to help bring balance and stability to the world. The Church has to keep its mission statement in focus and clearly communicated.

Those of you in the business world may have read or know of the author James Collins who has written two best-selling books on leadership, *Good to Great* and *Built to Last*. In *Built to Last*, Collins' primary theme for those businesses that survive through societal changes is "Preserve the Core/Stimulate Progress." The core ideology, the reason a company exists, must be balanced with a willingness to change and grow in order to fulfill the mission.

If an organization is to meet the challenges of a changing world, it must be prepared to change everything about itself except its basic beliefs.

The overarching message we proclaim in our mission is the same exact one that Paul coached Timothy to share: "Jesus is the Son of the God who gives life to all things, the King of kings and Lord of Lords, who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see." That God can be trusted, even if we don't have all the answers and all the understanding of what's going on right now. Amen.

That's the message you and I have to offer folks who are wandering out in the expanse of post-modern life. That's the message we have to offer folks who, like

the community Timothy was called to reach, were blinded by the transient material gains of this world that haven't seemed to answer all the questions and needs we as a society have.

We have a message that is more ful-filled and joy-filled. I suppose you could even say we were a filling station that "pumps people up" with the spiritual fuel they need to keep going out in the world.

But the image we've been guided by as we share our message is this: that Christ has called EDCC to be first, a spiritual oasis that provides refreshment and renewal for the weary souls of Urban Pioneers by offering them sanctuary—a safe place; and second, Christ has called EDCC to equip Urban Pioneers, once they are rested and renewed, for the work that we are all called to do out in the world—at our workplace, at school, in the neighborhood, as Christian citizens.

Over the past four weeks we've been contemplating our success with our mission. I've asked us to think about how we're doing. How are we doing at being a spiritual oasis? We have agreed that worship is a filling, renewing time for us, through word spoken and sung and the sacraments. We have agreed that there are other events where our spirits have soared and unified with the presence of God through concert series and prayer services.

A challenge, and therefore opportunity for us to grow, is by being more visible physically so that people know that such an Oasis is here for them. What does that mean? Many of you saw the pictures in the newsletter or on our webpage from the taping of the "dream wedding scene" in the ABC cop drama Chase in our sanctuary the other day. What you may not know, probably, is that for that same episode, Warner Brothers went across the street to Grace UMC to take pictures of the outside of the building to portray the outward facility of the church where the wedding takes place. Why? It looks more like a church to contemporary eyes than our building does.

One of the things our Masterplan committee has been doing is strategizing how we can be more transparent with our "outward appearance" to the street to help reveal to people that we ARE a spiritual oasis, a haven for those who are seeking

renewal in this crazy world, where Jesus's words are heard and felt, "come to me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

As you can imagine, the journey our Masterplan committee has been on has not been easy because of the complexity of this facility, but we are just about ready to present the plan to you all, and you will be hearing from us in a couple of months.

Of course, this is not the only thing we need to work on to help those Urban pioneers wandering in the wilderness of our modern world to find a place that will satisfy their thirsty souls. But it is an important one that we all need to pray about, and I invite you to pray for openness and for God's discernment in this direction.

The second part of our vision statement is even more important: Christ has called EDCC to equip Urban Pioneers for their personal mission and ministry in the world.

Back in the day, people would attend Sunday School classes, or mid-week studies, or join women's, men and youth fellowship groups where they would study the Bible, learn the basic essentials of the faith, and hopefully live their lives like Paul encouraged Timothy today, with righteousness and godliness, faith and love, steadfastness and gentleness.

It was in those small groups that people were equipped to handle the choices that the world threw at them, where they were supported by a familiar community when things got tough, where they held each other accountable when one of our own began to slip into sin.

Small groups are still important, but their purpose is changing. Let's be honest—whether it is right or not, our schedules don't allow us to show up to as many committee meetings, or week-day studies, or even special concerts. It's difficult to plan in a mission opportunity, especially one like Habitat that takes 8 consecutive Saturday mornings to help build a house. And not only our schedules—my goodness—we live all around the huge metroplex, and the

expense of gas, the distance it takes to drive to and from the church, is daunting.

But just because it's complex—just because things are crazy busy and society's priorities are changing—the church needs to continue to encourage folks to take advantage of small groups where they can swim deeper in the spiritual pools of God's wisdom and fellowship. We're going to continue to offer classes and outreach opportunities where folks are equipped and can live out their own call to mission.

In addition, more and more studies are showing that vital faith communities that are calling themselves "church" are not growing up around a building—but around an activity. When folks come together to build a habitat home, and at lunch read the parable about the man building his house on sandy ground or upon the rock—that's what some folks are calling church.

Then there are some other folks who are coming together in homes on a regular basis to watch movies, or share a book study while relating their experiences about how their lives are impacted by their faith in Jesus Christ. That's what some folks are calling church.

The equipping process is still done here—in our facility with our small groups which we will always need to offer.

But today we need to be aware, like Paul challenged Timothy,—that you have to get outside the walls and teach others how to live the abundant life. Our Faith in the City conversation group got started last week at Bryan Street Tavern, and that's exactly the kind of thing we may be moving to more and more—Being the church not only at 629 N. Peak, but also at Jerry World next Sunday, or at the Schlotzky's in your neighborhood, or at your home address.

I suppose what I'm saying is that while the message is the same as it always has been, we have been seeing good things changing in our church, with more yet to come, in order for Christ's message to reach an ever-changing world.

There's a story about a woman who brought home a plaque that said, "Prayer changes things." She put it in her kitchen, above her sink. Her husband came home, and said, "Take that thing down, please." She said, "Why? Don't you believe in prayer?" He said, "Yes, but I don't believe in change."

Well we believe in prayer, and that prayer can change the world, but it also roots us in the unshakable ground of being that is our God, as revealed to us by Jesus Christ our Lord.

That's the same Christ who called EDCC to be a spiritual oasis for urban pioneers who are renewed and equipped for their mission and ministry in the world.