

Emmaus Baptist Church — State of the Church Address
Wednesday, December 7, 2016

We exist to proclaim and display Jesus. Everything we say and do—every word and every action—must be about making known the hope and victory of Jesus.

We do this Up, In, and Out.

We live “Up” through Worship, realizing everything we have is *from* God and everything we have is *for* God. We worship Him individually in every moment throughout the week, and we gather corporately to worship Him as a church.

We live “In” through Discipleship as followers of Jesus. We grow in our relationship with God and our relationships with others, as God changes us from the inside out through His Word, His Spirit, and His Church.

We live “Out” through Missions. What God does within us—individually and corporately—should spill out to those around us. We give, go, pray, and serve so others will know the Good News of Jesus Christ. We do these things *here*—where we live, learn, work, and play—and we do them *faraway* where people have never heard the name of Jesus.

Prayerfully, this approach to church reflects God’s character—one God, three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Not three gods, but one. Not three parts of one god. One God; three persons. One church; three facets--Worship, Discipleship, and Missions. These are not separate pieces we can pick and choose; they are 3 inter-locking realities of our mission as a church.

And Emmaus is at an exciting juncture in our mission as a church!

-We’re 30 years old tonight.

-We have no financial debt.

-We’ve only had 3 pastors in 30 years.

-We have a legacy of faith and a solid reputation in our community.

In the past year, we’ve seen new members come from every generation of life. On the same day, we baptized an elementary-aged girl who had grown up at Emmaus and a woman in her 80’s who moved from Buddhist faith to trust in Jesus Christ. Folks who have been out of church for several years have reconnected. Our kids and students are engaged throughout the church by serving and learning alongside adults.

Numbers are a poor substitute for stories, and it’s hard to know exactly how numbers were counted and reported in the past, but based on the numbers I can find from the church’s history, our Sunday attendance has essentially returned to what it was in the mid-2000’s before it peaked in 2009.

As we enter a new calendar year, and the second year of my family’s time here, there are several things to consider. I want to address six tonight.

1. God-oriented Goals, for a God-honoring Vision, with God-ordained Plans

We want to pursue God-oriented goals and I want to lay out a God-honoring vision that is clear and compelling, without succumbing to strategies that by-pass a reliance on God's Word and the power of God's Spirit. Submitting our strategies and visions to His Word and will is not always easy, but we'll make a commitment to navigate those things together. We won't pretend strategy and plans don't matter, but neither will we succumb to market forces or manipulation.

2. Prepare for the "Difficult" Years Two and Three

Year two, and especially year three, can be bumpy for a church and their new pastor. Thom Rainer, who is a Southern Baptist executive and researcher, has done a lot of work in this area. He points out that beyond the first year, the church begins seeing the imperfections in the pastor's ministry (and are less afraid to point these out to him), and the pastor finds out that promises from the congregation--especially promises of being open and receptive to change--were unfulfilled. It's impossible to meet everyone's expectations; and during the second and third year, both the members and pastor easily become disillusioned and dissatisfied.

In addition, during the second and third year, the church gains a number of new members who arrived under the present pastor's tenure. Rainer notes that it's not uncommon for longer-term members, especially those in positions of influence or volunteer roles, to feel threatened or frustrated by the changes as new people move into the core of the church. After a long-term pastorate, such as Emmaus had recently, the next pastor often doesn't last long because, just as it's difficult for new members to break into an established situation, it's equally hard for a new pastor to break into well-established networks. We'll have to navigate these things together, choosing to trust one another and work together.

Two parables from Jesus stand out here.

In Matthew 9:16-17, Jesus said, "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved." He's making a theological point—and we don't want to miss that. He's focusing all of Scripture on Himself, and we reflect that truth as we proclaim and display Jesus in all things. This passage does acknowledge, though, the difficulty of combining old and new, especially when the two have different goals.

But Jesus also told another parable about old and new. In Matthew 13:52, he said, "Every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old." I think this describes us. New isn't necessarily good; old isn't bad; all that glitters isn't gold. We're just looking for the treasures, whether old or new.

3. Music/Worship Leadership Decisions

And that idea brings us directly to Number 3—as we move into 2017, we'll begin to address lingering questions about musical leadership. When I arrived at the end of 2015, I almost had my suitcase unpacked when Emmaus members began asking me what we were going to do about musical leadership. I couldn't figure out why we were rushing to address this; but at that point, I didn't grasp that Emmaus had been without full-time musical leadership for 3 1/2 years before I arrived. It's hard to be in limbo for a long time; it's equally a disservice to call what David has provided "interim" leadership. He has invested untold time and effort into leading our musical worship, and I know few people with his level of spiritual and emotional maturity. In fact, I don't know another situation in which a pastor could have freedom to discuss matters openly with a so-called interim leader who is also part of the church family.

So, how do we move forward? Well, with much fear and trembling...and primarily with prayer and fasting. This area of decision-making and leadership weighs me down. It's such an emotional issue; there are so many opinions and expectations involved, not to mention the relationships involved. To make sure we start on the right foot, early in 2017 we are going to have a series of Sunday morning sermons about music in the Bible and about biblical worship. These will form our foundation as we move ahead.

As we talk about long-term musical leadership, I'd ask you to keep an open mind that musical leadership in the church might not look the same as it has looked in the past. The roles on a church staff are changing rapidly in today's world. Other than maybe the secretary role, no other role has changed as much in church life as the worship leader. This role—what we pay for, what we expect, what this person does during the week, whether or not it's one full-time person or multiple part-time people—will require a lot of flexibility from us as a church. One thing I'm certain of, we're not going to hire a full-time music leader, just because we've always had a full-time music leader and that's what churches should do. We may end up with a full-time position—in fact, this is pretty likely—but it could look very different.

And, along with this staff position, comes the issue of music style. Do we change styles? Do we have multiple styles in multiple services? Some people want traditional; some want contemporary (though what most adults call contemporary is not contemporary to our teenagers—we have to face it, the so-called contemporary music has become the new traditional. Chris Tomlin won't be confused for Lecrae.)

I've been getting a lot of input from various pastors when it comes to music in church. Steve Dighton, who preached several times at Emmaus during the interim, has given me some good pastoral reasons to develop different multiple music styles in a church. I'm still working through this personally, because I struggle on some level with different services reflecting different music styles. Either way, I like the idea of multiple services. Emmaus worked hard to establish and pay for the new building, partly so we could have the unity of one service. But, I think we realize that simply sitting in the same building at the same time doesn't create unity or energy. Plus, the building is a resource for

reaching people, and no one here wants the size or style of a building to stand in the way of making the Gospel known. We have incredible resources on our property at Emmaus; we want to be good stewards of these without being held captive by them.

The numbers are interesting at this point. I mentioned earlier that attendance at Emmaus began to turn downward in 2009; this could've been for several reasons, but it coincides exactly with when we left multiple services and moved into the bigger building. Multiple services are complicated, but they allow more people a chance to serve and more opportunities for people to engage. The trend in churches today is toward smaller venues and more services. I'm not saying we'll move to multiple services in 2017, but it's something that is on my mind and that connects with the music question.

Another interesting set of numbers related to music style and the future of Emmaus has to do with the ages of our attenders. Based on the best data we have from this past year, here are the percentages of our attenders based on age:

80+	3%
70s	10%
60s	11%
50s	10%
40s	12%
30s	13%
20s	4%
Teens	10%
5 to 12	20%
0 to 4	7%

Several things jump out from these numbers. We are certainly an inter-generational church, with amazing consistency across the decades. Two specific numbers to highlight are the lack of people in their 20s and the significant percentage of kids who will soon move into their teens. In addition, we will continue to have a solid percentage of median to older adults. Worship leadership and music style are only small parts of the equation, but I thought these percentages were interesting and provided good discussion points for thinking about the future of Emmaus.

4. Long-Range Planning Process

Fourth, and moving much faster on points 4 and 5, in 2017 we'll start to consider some long-range planning questions, both for our property and for our church as a whole. 2017 may include the formation of a long-term planning group, or that group might not happen until 2018, with 2017 being a series of prayer groups and forums.

5. Constitution and By-Laws

Fifth, we should be able to complete our revision of the constitution and by-laws this next year. We'll keep you up-to-date as this develops.

6. Renewed Missions Strategy

Finally, I want to focus the remainder of time on how we will approach missions as a church. Worship applies to missions, because as John Piper has said, “Missions exists because worship does not.” We go on mission because we want all people to worship God. In fact, Worship is a form of Missions (1 Corinthians 14). Discipleship applies to missions because the Great Commission calls us to make disciples, not count converts (Matthew 28). As God transforms us from the inside-out, we become a light to those around us, in hopes that their lives will be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ.

So, what will our church’s approach to missions look like going forward?

6.1. Evangelism

I know evangelism can be a scary word. If you’ve been around church, you’ve probably been through one or more evangelism training courses. You might even feel a little jaded about the idea of sharing your faith.

Here’s my concern personally, and for us as a church—the concern is that my lack of personal evangelism reflects either a lack of faith in the Gospel or some sort of hidden, sub-conscious belief that people don’t really need to hear about Jesus.

And I worry about this for Emmaus because much of our church growth over the years has been through transfer growth—Christians moving from one church to another. There’s a place for transfer growth; it’s not a bad thing and is often a sign of church health. And we’ve seen plenty of people, even in the past year, leave our church for another church. With much prayer, there is a time and place for this to happen.

Here’s the rub, though—transfer growth is not church growth. Many churches, especially in our part of the world, have grown rapidly, but much of that growth has been transfer growth. Real church growth, in the style of the New Testament, is growth that happens as people repent and turn to Christ and become His followers. We want to grow by multiplication of new disciples, not addition of other Christians.

Transfer growth is a hard thing to stop. It’s hard to stop partly because it feels good to see a church growing in number, and we don’t stop to consider how it’s happening. Also, it’s hard to stop because most of us, especially those who have been in church a long time, don’t have many non-Christian friends. Church people build relationships with church people (and this isn’t a bad thing; it’s a healthy part of discipleship), but we aren’t engaged with people who need to see the love and hope of Jesus on display.

And, surprisingly enough, this discussion is related to what was said earlier about music style. Many people choose a church based on music style. People move from one church to another based on music style. Usually—not always, but usually—the people making these choices and moving to different churches are Christians. In other words,

churches battle over music style for the purpose of attracting to their church those who are already Christians, and in the process missing those most in need of the Gospel.

My hope and prayer for myself and for our church is that we would live out and share our faith in such a way that people who are hurting and in need of a Savior would see the joy of Worship and Discipleship, not as things which we choose based on our personal preferences, but things which transform and fulfill our lives.

6.2. Ethnic and Economic Diversity

Missions and Worship converge in Revelation 7:9-10. Here, John says, “After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’”

Admittedly, I have a vested interest in local church diversity because my family is multi-ethnic through the gift of adoption. But I also think it’s important for local churches to pursue diversity as a reflection of the picture of Heaven in Revelation 7. In some sense, a local church will only be as diverse as its community; but I’m certain our community is more diverse than our current congregation. I pray that God would graciously allow us to display ethnic and economic diversity to our community as a picture of the Gospel.

We’ll also want to pay attention to ethnic and economic diversity in coming years because of the changing nature of suburbs. There are multiple congregations in the American South full of white people who drive to their church building which is surrounded by a community that looks nothing like the congregation. A suburb is often white and a little wealthier in its early years; but over time, suburbs tend to become much more diverse. This isn’t always the case, but we don’t want to miss changes in our community and fail to minister to those whom God has placed around us.

You might not know this, but the first Baptist church in Oklahoma was ethnically diverse. At Ebenezer Station outside of present day Muskogee, there were two Anglos, one Native American and three blacks who made up that church family. We’re known now for being almost all white, but we have an important heritage of diversity that is desperately needed in the 21st century.

6.3. SBC Re-Engagement

That story about Ebenezer Station in Muskogee brings us to a big part of our renewed mission strategy. I want to lead Emmaus to re-engage with our Southern Baptist heritage. Southern Baptists might be known for many things, but a core bond is our commitment to missions. And at the heart of this commitment to missions is a commitment to share resources through the Cooperative Program, so that we can do more together than we can apart.

If you didn't grow up in a Southern Baptist church, you might not know about the Cooperative Program or our strategy for missions. I hope we can learn more about this together in the days ahead. But here's the gist of it: Every week, I receive multiple requests—through phone calls, mail, or email—asking our church to support mission efforts and ministry programs. Almost every request is great! But, we can't say yes to every one. In fact, we say 'No' to almost every one. Why? Because we don't believe in the spread of the Gospel? Of course not! We have to say 'No' to most requests so we can invest our resources strategically, with wisdom and faith.

Baptist churches in the early 20th century became so overwhelmed with weekly requests from missionaries and ministry programs that they decided to combine their resources and support missions through cooperation. This way, a rural church in western Oklahoma was just as involved as a mega-church in Dallas. The result was something called the Cooperative Program.

Through the Cooperative Program, Southern Baptists were able to establish seminaries, expand mission work, and develop strategies for engaging our world through disaster relief, public policy, and literature. Here's the amazing thing...as Southern Baptists, we are able to minister to people at every stage of their life. Hope Pregnancy Centers protect the unborn and minister to moms and dads. Baptist Homes for Children provides care for kids without homes and for single-parent families. Children and teenagers hear the Gospel through camps like Falls Creek. College students have an option to attend OBU or benefit from Baptist Student Ministries at our state colleges and universities. The Baptist Foundation of Oklahoma helps adults of all ages prepare a will or trust. And Baptist Village Communities is Oklahoma's largest not-for-profit provider of senior housing service.

Today, in my opinion, the missional impact of Southern Baptists is needed more than ever. And I'm committed to leading us to engage fully with this approach. Hear me out—this doesn't mean every mission trip or every ministry partner has to be Southern Baptist. We realize and celebrate that God works powerfully throughout the whole Body of Christ. In fact, some of the new initiatives in Southern Baptist missions are leading us to closer work with other mission groups. At Emmaus, we will continue to be good partners with those of shared beliefs and values.

However, continuing the incredible legacy of missions at Emmaus will include re-engaging and optimizing our Southern Baptist identity. You'll see this reflected in the budget this year, and I hope we can continue learning and growing in this area in years to come. It will affect everyone of us—teenagers and college students going on mission trips, adults seeking to use their careers for the Kingdom of God, and retirees choosing to invest their talents and hobbies for the spread of the Gospel.

6.4. Mission Partnerships

As we make decisions about where to invest our time and resources, we need to consider how we partner with missionaries and ministry programs. Too often, churches

develop connections with ministry partners because someone is related to someone, or someone knows someone who knows someone else. The church supports the missionary or mission agency, but there is no agreement or strategic plan. And this support is often open-ended—no end date or goals exist.

I want us to develop strategic mission partnerships, most of which will be based on renewable, three-year commitments. This approach allows us to be good stewards of our resources and prevents unmet expectations that might form for a missionary or ministry. These three-year partnerships would include some combination of prayer, visible information and updates about the mission, planned trips from Emmaus, and/or financial support. Decisions for partnerships will be made through the suggestions and prayers of the members, an overall strategic filtering process by the staff, and final approval in the budget process, if the partnership involved financial support or trips. After the partnership ends, members would be encouraged to continue praying for the missionary and could certainly continue giving individually as they are led by the Lord.

What we're trying to do with these partnerships is distinguish between missionaries and ministry groups that are attached to our church budget and calendar, and those missionaries and groups that our church members support individually. By all means, we want members to support and engage with mission efforts beyond the partnerships at Emmaus. I don't expect the church to invest in every mission endeavor that my family thinks is important. At the same time, I want my family to be part of a church that is working together on mission efforts that are shared by the congregation as a whole. These congregational mission partnerships will focus our church's efforts and resources on the goal of getting the Gospel to those who are unreached or to those without access to a healthy, vibrant local church.

One Southern Baptist missionary hero is Lottie Moon. She made fun of church until she became a Christian at age 18. She was extremely smart and ambitious and became one of the first women in the South to earn a master's degree. She spent 39 years in China, before dying on the mission field at the age of 72.

In one of her letters, she said, "We implore you to send us help. Let not these heathen sink down into eternal death without one opportunity to hear that blessed gospel, which is to you the source of all joy and comfort."

6.5. Continued Community Engagement

Won't global missions and these mission partnerships take away from our local impact? Not at all! Community missions is a hallmark of Emmaus and we only intend to expand this. We don't want hosting two elementary schools to be the peak of our community involvement. This year, we are developing a weekday preschool, planning a huge Serve day, organizing a local mission trip for families this summer, using our shower trailer to take church to the homeless, and developing a new strategy for making members aware of ways they can get involved. As with global missions, we want our community missions to be a combination of church-sponsored partnerships and members simply

living out their faith on a daily basis. You will know about and meet needs in your daily life that we could never—and don't need to—organize as a congregation. Some things we will do together. But in the end, community engagement is mainly about proclaiming and displaying Jesus where we live, learn, work, and play.

6.6. 21st Century Flexibility and Biblical Humility

In closing, we want to hold all of our strategies and plans with an open hand, extended toward the Lord in worship and submission.

Emmaus, I couldn't be more excited to be a partner in the Gospel alongside you all. I thank God for you and can't wait to see where He leads us, even if it looks nothing like what we've planned.

Proverbs 16:9 says, "The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps."

In the same way, Proverbs 19:21 says, "Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand."

The world has always experienced change; what is unprecedented in our day is the speed of change. We don't know what the next day will bring, much less the next year. So, we will live by faith, trusting in the wisdom of God's Word, which doesn't change. Our message and mission won't change, but our methods must be flexible as we make known the hope and victory of Jesus to the world around us.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Owen Nease". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letters of "Owen" and "Nease" being capitalized and prominent.

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