

Vision for East Lincoln

This is the last Sunday of our series where I've been unfolding the elder's vision for East Lincoln, and like I said last week, today isn't really going to be a sermon, but more of an explanation of the vision the elders have.

Most of us have probably heard about Mercy Ships. These are ships that travel to needy areas around the world to provide humanitarian aid and free health care. The entire crew is made up of volunteers: surgeons, dentists, nurses, deckhands, carpenters, seamen, teachers, cooks, engineers, machinists, welders, plumbers, videographers, photographers, writers, electricians, agriculturalists. Many different parts, many different roles, many different passions – all on the same ship, headed in the same direction, working together toward a common goal.

Now imagine a mercy ship that has the same crew, but they don't have a common goal. Each group of volunteers does their own thing. The medical staff has one goal, the deckhands and seamen have another, the carpenters, welders, and machinists another, the videographers and photographers another, the cooks another... you get the idea. Good things may happen in each area and those areas might be strong and functioning well, but who knows where that ship's going?

That gives kind of a picture of where I think we've been as a church. We've had a lot of good things going on, but we haven't had a clear goal and process to unite us. So different areas of ministry have ended up having to do their own thing. I've seen the desire for us all to head in the same direction, but we've lacked the vision for what that direction should be – until now. God has helped us see our unifying goal and a process for reaching that goal that can bring us all together. And the elders hope to see a churchwide shift take place so that we can be like a mercy ship where every person and every area of ministry is headed in the same direction.

That's what this sermon series has been all about. We've looked at the goal, which is following Jesus and helping one another become like him in every way. Christ has called us as a church to make disciples and that's what a disciple is – one who follows Jesus and becomes like him in their thoughts, character, behavior, and mission. That's what we're to be aiming at together. And I think that's something we've already known. But what's been missing is a process for reaching that goal. How are we going to get there?

That's what the elders started to become aware of when we read the book Real-life Discipleship. We saw a church with the same goal as us, but who also had a vision for a process for reaching that goal. We started seeing that becoming like Christ takes place in different stages of growth. Those who are spiritually "unborn" must be born again. They become spiritual "infants" who then grow into spiritual "children" and "young adults" and "parents." And at each of these stages people have different needs and characteristics, and there should be different expectations and steps to grow that are appropriate for each stage.

Once we started to see that we also started to see how the church can come alongside and meet people where they're at and help them grow from there. Our ministries need to have strategic roles in helping people grow at different stages. So we started to look at what we're doing and how we could use our existing ministries to help people grow. We also started thinking about how we could help people assess where they're at so they'd know steps they could take to grow.

My hope is that this series has helped you assess where you're at and how you can grow and today I want to give you the big picture of how we want to help in that process as a church. I want to talk about what we're doing to help people grow at each stage of spiritual maturity.

For people who are spiritually "unborn," there are some things we're doing locally and globally. Locally, we are trying to share the hope of Christ with people in the community by doing some organized outreach events to serve people in the name of Jesus. We have the Easter Egg Hunt in the spring, Hope Alive in June, Helping Hands Day in the fall, and some kind of event in winter – this year we are partnering with Karar to offer A Christmas Carol free of charge. We are hoping that God will use these events to make some connections that turn people toward Jesus.

We are also trying to encourage everyone in the church to engage in personal evangelism – in your neighborhood, work, and school. We all already have connections with people who are spiritually "unborn," and we can pray for them, love and serve them, and be open to opportunities to share about the hope of Jesus with them. We want those who are spiritually "unborn" to feel welcome at our worship services. Even though the worship service is primarily to minister to Christians, we hope that the gathering of believers and the love that we have for one another will be appealing to those who are not yet part of Christ. So if you have suggestions for ways we can partner with you so you could invite unbelievers to come to church, let us know.

We have an evangelism committee that oversees and keeps a pulse on these local efforts and looks for new opportunities and ways that God may direct us as a church as well.

When it comes to our global effort to reach the spiritually unborn, we are seeking to partner with different missionaries around the world, some who have come out of our church and others who are with the Christian and Missionary Alliance. We partner with them by supporting them financially and prayerfully, and we try to give you updates on their ministry every quarter during the worship services. We also partner with them by going on short term mission trips so that people from our very own church family can go to a different culture and experience more of a big picture of God's global mission to reach the spiritually "unborn." We have a missions committee to keep track and lead us in these things.

For those who are at the spiritual "infant" stage, or new believers, we want them to get plugged into the worship service and a small group so they can build relationships, but our primary goal is to get them connected with a spiritual mentor from the church who is in the spiritual "parent" stage. In our context we feel that this is the best way to teach new believers the basics of the faith and to walk alongside them as they begin their lifelong journey with Jesus. We hope to set up more of an organized mentoring program for training and connecting mentors with new believers. At this point, I am overseeing this as we move forward. For children, we have Discovery Land and for middle and high school students we have Recharge to help them grow in their faith.

For those who are at the spiritual "child" stage, it's at this stage that the elders feel the worship service and small groups are most critical. Since spiritual "children" are learning so much about so many things it's really important that they engage in regular, ongoing Bible study in both the corporate and small group setting. Our worship services are primarily geared for teaching people at this stage. I'm probably not going to do seminary level preaching that is heavy on theological language or the original Greek and Hebrew. Some of you would eat that up, but for most it would not be helpful.

We also want the emphasis of the study at small groups to be primarily for people at the spiritual "child" stage for the same reasons – the small groups give the added benefit of personal engagement and discussion. So if you identify yourself as being at the spiritual "child" stage – and that will include many people in this room – it's really important that you make consistent attendance at the worship

services and small groups a high priority in your spiritual growth. Again, for children, we provide Discovery Land and for older students we have Recharge.

We also have a wonderful resource in RightNow Media to help people grow. There are thousands of video Bible studies that you can use for personal growth or in a small group.

For those who are at the spiritual “young adult” stage, it’s all about helping them get plugged into joyful ministry – using their gifts to help build up the church family. So we’re wanting to develop a way for people to learn and discover their gifts and get plugged into a ministry team or committee. We’ve done a Ministry Fair in the past and we may look at doing one again on an annual basis to be an avenue by which people can learn about and get plugged into ministry. This is the stage where we encourage people to begin to try out small group leadership – it’s not necessarily going to be for everyone, but it’s a great way to get plugged into building others up.

For those who are at the spiritual “parent” stage, the main emphasis we want to point to is spiritual mentoring – learning how to come alongside newer believers to help them get a good foundation and solid start in the Christian life. We especially need mentors who are willing to meet with people at the spiritual “infant” stage, but mentoring can certainly continue through the spiritual “child” and “young adult” stages as well. My hope is to develop a program for training spiritual mentors and matching them with newer believers.

So wherever a person is at there are different ways we want to encourage and support you as a church.

Church Bookstore

One more new effort we are making is to provide a variety of resources for people to use to help them grow at each of these stages. This is where the new Church Bookstore comes in. (Go through the different resources for each stage and give a brief explanation... More resources will be added over time)

Church Website

Go to the church website to show how everything is available through there...

Additional Comments

This vision for the church is new, and there aren’t necessarily a lot of noticeable changes on the outside – it’s more about a new framework for seeing why we do

what we do that gives purpose and direction. And we realize that changes and new developments will happen over time as the Holy Spirit guides and teaches us, but we are excited to have a place to start. And we hope that unfolding this vision has been helpful and clarifying for you. We hope that you will be able to implement these things in your own life and that they will help you as you seek to help others grow.

I want to go back to one of the main passages this all started with in Ephesians 4:11-16: *“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”*

What I see for our church family is a people joined together with a passion for Jesus and be become more and more like him in every way. To be reaching the people in our community with the life-giving hope of the gospel. To have more mature believers actively coming alongside newer, younger believers to help them grow in their faith. To be a people who are eager to gather together for worship, fellowship, and Bible study. To have people joyfully plugged in and serving in ministry. And to be a people who embrace the responsibility to pass along the faith and encourage the next generation to follow Christ. This is what we’re aiming for, and by the grace of God and power of the Holy Spirit we will see it come to fulfillment.