

State of the Church 2020: Part 1

Pastors Bryan Clark and Jeff Petersen

(Bryan Clark):

Good morning. We're really excited to have you here this morning and very excited for what you're going to hear. In the midst of frustrating, uncertain times, our hope this morning is you will walk out this door with a smile on your face, with joy in your heart, and a thankful spirit as we celebrate what God has done. Once a year, in August, we take the time for what we call the *State of the Church*. It's to remind ourselves what we're about. This year we're going to do it in two weeks—this week and next weekend—as we wrap up the last decade, and really look at what God has done over the last 10 years. Our mission statement for Lincoln Berean is:

To glorify God by seeking to present every person complete in Christ.

We are constantly wrestling with that language *every person*. What are the implications of that? What does that mean? And what you're going to hear this week and next week is that God has done remarkable things, far beyond the campus of Lincoln Berean, as we seek *to present every person complete in Christ*. The vision statement should be familiar to you. Josh and Ryan and Jeff have spent the summer unpacking this statement for us:

Coming together to know Jesus, become more like Him, and help others do the same.

They called this series RENEWED because it isn't really a new vision. It's fresh language to the same vision we've had for decades. They did a great job of unpacking that statement. If you weren't with us this summer, I'd really encourage you to get the series and go through it; it's a good reminder of what we're about as a church. In 2010 we launched an initiative, a campaign of sorts, that we called *A Decade on Purpose*. Really the heartbeat of that was to encourage everyone to think about whatever season of life you're in, and frame it around the next 10 years, realizing you don't get any of those days back again. What will matter for you, and how do you make sure that you live the next 10 years on purpose for the things that matter? So, we introduced that concept with this video. Check it out:

(Video):

"In 10 years, I will have read my last bedtime story." "In 10 years, I'll be driving." "In 10 years, I'm going to be you." "In 10 years, this house will be empty." "In 10 years, I'll be done climbing the corporate ladder." "In 10 years, I'll be retired." "How much time do I have to teach my girls?" "How much time do I have to make a difference?"

If you know anyone in that video, it's immediately obvious how much time has passed, how much has changed. You blink a couple times and 10 years is gone, and you don't get any of those days back. So, the repeating message of the last decade was to live for the things that matter. One of the people in that video, Ben, the older gentleman, has actually worked for us for a number of years, and on Tuesday he had a heart attack here at the building, was taken by ambulance to the hospital, and honestly, all week he's been fighting for his life. There's this sobering reminder that what he said on the video is true. You just don't know how many days left do I have to make a difference? So, there's been this repeated message for 10 years that you don't know, so live for the things that matter. Who could have imagined in January, what was ahead for the next six months, and how much has changed? I can't tell you how many times over these last six months, there's been a deep satisfaction in knowing

we have done everything in our power to encourage people again and again and again, to live for what matters. It's a reminder we're not in control, that everything can change in a moment. Jesus said, "If you treasure treasures on earth, you're going to lose them. No matter what you do, you can't keep them." But if you treasure treasures in heaven, no politician, no leader, no doctor, no disease can diminish or take away what you've invested in the things that will matter forever. There should be a deep, deep, sense of satisfaction that these are the things that will still matter a thousand years from now. So that was kind of the heart and soul of *A Decade on Purpose*.

In addition to that, there were six initiatives, and I want to go through those quickly. But it's really important to understand, some of these we all were involved in directly, but with most of them, it was more indirectly. But it's really important to us as leaders that when you walk out these doors, you realize that if you gave, if you served, if you prayed, you've been a part of what God has done around the world, and we should celebrate that together.

The first initiative was: **Eliminate the Debt**. In October of 2016, for the first time in over fifty years, Lincoln Berean was one hundred percent debt free! It was an amazing moment for us, and there have been many times in the last six months where we have celebrated that we're not trying to manage some huge debt in the midst of very uncertain times. So that was a great moment for us!

The second one is: **Next Generation Leaders**. Ten years ago it was obvious that our leadership across the church was primarily baby boomers and up, and we realized we needed to be very deliberate in transitioning to the younger generation. So, I think we've made a significant amount of progress all across the board—men and women leaders in ministries across Lincoln Berean. If you were to see a picture of our staff today, it's very obvious that there's been a dramatic change as we have new, young, dynamic, talented men and women leaders in significant positions. There's been a lot of change on our staff. We've added young leaders to the elder board, young leaders to the business team and the directional team. This is the senior team that leads the church and has completely changed out the church vision, and is being led by Josh, Ryan and Jeff. So, there's been a lot of change, a lot of transition to younger leaders. Now I'll tell you, I understand why churches don't do this. It wasn't easy; there were a lot of bumps in the road, a lot of trial and error of trying to figure this thing out. It really was a challenge, but we feel like we've come through it. We have clarity. We're very excited for where we are. We're very excited about the future. So, we feel really good about that one.

Next one is what we called: **Multiplied Vision**. And what we meant by that is, "How do we take what God has blessed us with and use it or steward it for the greater purpose of the kingdom?" So how can we help churches? How can we help pastors? How can we help leaders out beyond Berean? In a sense, this is our way of giving back. None of us could have imagined how this would transpire, ways that God has used Lincoln Berean to impact churches and leaders and pastors all across the US. That's what next week is all about, so am really excited for that.

The next one is: **Global Church Planting**, which is what today is about, and we'll talk more about that in just a couple of minutes.

The next one: **Ethnic Church Planting** is one where we really did not accomplish our goal. We didn't make much progress on this one at all. I think it's easy to think you just put up six things, do them, and check the boxes. But what we've always said is, "If God doesn't show up, we can't do these things," and for whatever reason, God didn't open doors; we couldn't make progress. We aren't going to just force it to try to do it, so we're still waiting on God with this. But this is the one of the six where nothing really significant happened.

The last one is what I already mentioned and that is: **Personal Mission**, for everybody to live on mission, which of course we'll continue on into this decade. This is why the guys did the RENEWED series this summer, to remind us that the mission goes on, and we need to continue to live on mission.

So again, thinking through if you've been part of Lincoln Berean over the last 10 years, whether it's directly or indirectly, you have been part, and you have made possible some amazing things—extraordinary things—that God has done around the world. I'm really excited for you to hear this, so at this time, I turn it over to Jeff.

(Jeff Petersen):

Can an ordinary group of people, in an ordinary place like Lincoln, actually help change the world? Can we actually be involved in meaningful works that will lead to lasting and significant impact among the great needs of the world in far-away places? I believe the answer is, “No”. We can't...unless we are willing to align our lives to the plans and the purposes of an extraordinary God. But what if we will align our lives to God's plans and God's purposes? Well, then that is a totally different story.

If you have a Bible with you this morning, would you turn with me to Matthew, Chapter 28? Last week Josh shared and taught us from Matthew 28 and from Acts 1, as we talked at the end of the RENEWED series about being people who are taking the good news of Jesus to those around us. I want to just briefly revisit Matthew 28, as we lay a biblical foundation for global missions, and then I want to share with you some of the extraordinary things that God has done and how He has used even us. In Matthew 28, we find Jesus with His disciples just before His ascension, and here we find Jesus giving what is frequently called the *Great Commission*. These are the marching orders that He is passing on to those people and leaders who will soon become and lead the church. And what Jesus tells them is that they are to go *in His name*. Beginning in verse 18, He says:

“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (*NASB, Matthew 28:18-20)

This morning, I want to focus in on just one aspect of that *Great Commission*, and that is where Jesus said to the Church that we are to **go and make disciples of all the nations**. Do you understand that what that means is that the Church cannot be faithful to the calling of God, the Church cannot be obedient to the commands of Jesus, if the Church is not somehow seeking to be engaged in making disciples of all the nations? You know, today, depending on the criteria that you use, there are about 200 political countries on Earth. That's quite a scope, but that doesn't actually even tell the story because when Jesus said to make disciples of all the nations, He was not referring to political countries. In fact, the word translated **nations** in Matthew 28 is *ethné*, which means peoples or people groups. Again, depending on the criteria you use, there are upward of 11,000 people groups on Earth. That's the scope of the mission of the Church, to make disciples of all the nations, to see gospel communities among all the peoples of the Earth. So, as we have talked and prayed over the years and decades as a church, about how we might be involved globally, one of the things that had to inform and drive our strategy was global need.

Let me show you this slide, a slide current from *Operation World*, which shows the top six gospel-deprived countries on earth, in terms of people groups—unreached people groups. Those are the numbers highlighted:

MOST UNREACHED PEOPLE GROUPS

India 2,223

China 427

Pakistan 374

Bangladesh 353

Nepal 325

Indonesia 200

So those would be the ethné, the biblical nations to which Jesus was referring in Matthew 28, and you notice there is one country that stands out from all the rest. The country of India has an excess of five times as many unreached people groups, as anywhere else in the world. So the Lord began to put it on our hearts that, if we were going to focus on being obedient to the great commission as a local church—as Lincoln Berean—shouldn't we seek to be about that work in the world's most spiritually needy nation? And that's exactly what we've been setting out to do over the past couple of decades. I want to actually show you kind of a progression of how that work is taking place.

If we can advance to the map, this will show you. We'll just look at the map, and I want to go state by state to give you a picture of where this has gone as we sought to plant churches in India. We began first of all in the state of Andhra Pradesh in southern India, then Tamil Nadu and Karnataka and Telangana, then to North India, we went into Haryana and then Jharkhand and East India. That was all before the last decade. Then West Bengal and then Chhattisgarh and then Lord opened up Nepal as a new country. Then Himachal Pradesh in North India, Bihar, and then we went into northeast India to Assam and Arunachal Pradesh and also into Meghalaya and then back we see Odisha, then back into the northeast to Manipur and the tiny little state of Sikkim at the top, and then Uttarakhand in North India and then Bangladesh our third country, Bhutan the fourth country and finally a fifth country of Indonesia. Then back in the states in India with Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and right now we are training leaders for Gujarat, Tripura, and for Jammu in the far northern part of India and now watch the whole thing fill in. And I tell you, when I see that map, (*clapping*) I literally do not even know how to process it.

At the beginning of the decade, when we formed what we called LBC South Asia to be our expression of this church engaged in planting churches in South Asia, we actually set a vision and said, "What if God would give us the privilege of starting a church planting movement in every state in India?" But to see the map that filled out is incredible, even for me. I want to bring it back up and I want to tell you a little bit more about what we're focusing on in our strategy. You know, you see that and you look at the scope of that, and you think, "Wow, what a praise to God!" But it would be really easy, particularly I think, as Westerners, for us to make a strategy that says, "Okay, well, let's plant a church in each one of those states. and so we'll have one church here, and we'll have one church here, and we'll have one church here, and then look, we'll be able to put up that map and that looks great, because we're all over India." The problem is that wouldn't really accomplish the mission. India now has 1.3 billion people and India alone has 500,000 communities where there is absolutely no church—not one single church. So, the strategy over there had to be different than what we do over here. Here, we can plant a church in this city or in this community or that place and that's great because there are churches in most places. In India, where there is no church in half a million communities, we realized the focus of what we needed to do was be about what are called, *church planting movements*. That means we didn't want to just start a church in each of these places. We wanted to send in a leader who would start a church...that would start a church...that would start a church...that would start a church, and that reproduction and multiplication will be a part of the DNA of the strategy from the very beginning. And that is what God has been doing.

Here's kind of what it looks like. This is what's called the generation map or a Gen Map, and this is one of our leader's actual work in the last 10 years. So, the strategy is: we have a full-time movement

leader who is a staff member with us, who goes into one of those states—one of those new geographic areas—and starts a church, and that's the circle on the top. This particular individual, in the last decade, went into a new geographic area and started five churches. But not only did this individual start those five churches, this individual raised up leadership for those churches. And, from those churches, they would actually start more churches and, by the way, all of those five leaders and all of the ones below them are completely unpaid. The only person who is paid is the full-time movement leader starting a church planting movement in a specific geographic area. All the rest are simply Kingdom-minded disciples, engaged in planting churches in areas of great need. So, you see what's happened in one man's ministry.

Now another leader is on the left and another one on the right on this slide. Again, these are just a few samples of what we've been seeing. We actually had missiologists who have been involved in church planting help us map our work and, when they saw what God was doing, they said it was extraordinary! And one of the things that made it extraordinary in the eyes of those who have been involved in trying to see the world reached through church planting for decades and decades, was the fact that we are seeing generational multiplication, and not just to the first and second, but to the fourth, the fifth, and sometimes the sixth generation. Because, as God begins to do that, that is what begins to change a place and allow the church to go from place to place to place to place. Here is what it kind of looks like. This is an actual satellite map of an undisclosed area in North India, where we are involved in church planting. Every single one of those dots represents a church plant, and you can see they're clustered together because a church plants a church that plants a church, so all of those come out of this progress of multiplication.

Here's a look at an area where we're working in East India. You see the same thing as those churches are multiplying and becoming a cluster in that area. Here's just part of Nepal where we're working, and you see what the cluster of churches looks like there and, just for fun, this is Bhutan, in part of Northeast India, just giving you an idea of another area where multiplying church planting is taking place. When you look at all of that, you begin to see this map through a different lens, because we aren't just trying to have one church in each of those states to feel good about ourselves. We're actually asking God to allow us to partner with Him to see something take place that will change the significant need. And if you think about those states now, not as individual places, but as clusters of churches here and there, you begin to see what God is doing. We do not by any means have that density of clusters in all 22 states and five countries that you see on this map, but we do in many places and that is what we're asking God to do as we continue to launch into new geographic areas. And God continues to open up new doors of opportunity and that is simply extraordinary.

But then you have to go back to asking the question of, “How do you accomplish this task?” For us, we realize we had to shift from trying to just send out church planters into so many places, to developing and recruiting top level leaders. Now today, in addition to all of the staff we have serving on the church staff here in Lincoln, we have 43 full-time staff members who are movement leaders in LBC South Asia. And it's important to say that often when churches talk about missionaries or the things that they're doing, what they really are talking about is someone who's working for another organization that the church is partly supporting and is involved with. That is not the case in this situation. There's no other organization involved. In fact, we created what we call LBC South Asia, and those 43 movement leaders are all fully a part of our team and the work that God has birthed out of this local church. Even more incredible, then, is to see how God has used them over the last decade. Those 43 leaders, as they have sought to plant churches and develop leaders, have raised up 881 unpaid leaders who are actively involved in various facets of helping with church planting. That's why we're beginning to see multiplying movements, because we recognize the need for laborers, and we knew we could never hire enough people to do that kind of work. So, this is a strategy that allows

us to deploy ordinary people to be involved in church planting, and look at the extraordinary result that God brought.

In just the last 10 years we can document that there are 6,858 people who not only came to Christ but are regularly and actively involved in the churches that have been planted by LBC South Asia. Think of that when you think of church growth. In the last 10 years, in addition to all the things that God's done here in Lincoln, He has grown the church through LBC South Asia by 6,858 people. Simply extraordinary! (*clapping*)

But wait, there's more! Like they say on the infomercial, right? It does get even better because when we put this slide back, and we think about the needs in the world, look again at those countries—the top six most gospel-deprived, spiritually-needy nations on Earth. Somehow by the sovereignty and the grace of God, Lincoln Berean Church is actively and strategically involved in church planting movements in four of the six most needy political countries on Earth. But even more exciting is when we think again, that it's not political countries that matters, it's people's! It's the nations biblically that Jesus was speaking of and this is where I just don't even know how to put it into words. But God, being the extraordinary God that He is, has somehow allowed this ordinary group of people in this ordinary place to be actively involved in church planting among 190 nations, biblically speaking, ethné people groups right now today. (*clapping*) It gets better though.

I think the next slide is perhaps even more exciting. Those are 190 unreached people groups, but this is 17 what missiologists call UUPG's, which stands for Unreached Unengaged People Groups. What that means is that to anyone's ability to document that these are people's, these are biblical nations that never in human history have had anyone actually seeking to bring the good news of Jesus Christ and His love to those peoples in active, ongoing and strategic ways. They're not only unreached, nobody's even engaged with them! But, by the grace of God, through what He is doing, we get to be involved with Him in planting churches right now among 17 unreached, unengaged people groups on Earth. So when we come back to the map, with that detail in mind and that deeper level of understanding, the only thing that I can say is, “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly, abundantly beyond all we can ask or even imagine, to Him be the glory in the church now, and forevermore!” Friends, that is something to celebrate. (*clapping*) That is a *Decade on Purpose*. Amen!

But now we are in a new decade. It's 2020, and boy, how did this one start out? With a global pandemic! And it's been difficult for churches. Honestly, I think a lot of churches have kind of chosen to go into hibernation, but you know, we've been talking and praying a lot here at Lincoln Berean and said, “You know what? The mission matters too much. We have got to continue to be a people who go out on mission. That's why the last two weeks at the end of the RENEWED Series, Ryan and Josh talked about this idea of us helping others to know the love of Jesus Christ. Jason and others have led in showing example after example of neighboring, how even in the midst of a pandemic, we have opportunity right in front of us if we will be the hands and feet of Jesus to love the people all around us right here in our city. That's what we've been talking about the last couple of weeks.

Well, guess what? The same thing has been happening on the other side of the world. Early in the pandemic, I called one of our top-line leaders and, when I found out that India was going into a total lockdown I said, “What now?” All of our travel was shut down, all of our conferences, all of our training, all of our typical methodology for being able to accomplish what God has called us to. I could almost hear the smile in his voice when he said, “We're not shut down.” He understood they needed to pivot their strategy, but they were already engaged in figuring out more creative ways to reach people with the love of Jesus. They started using this old thing called the telephone. They started calling people and talking to people. They started reaching out to their near neighbors and, through

their networks of relationships, they saw a critical opportunity. India has millions of people who were economically displaced through the lockdown. Today is Day 145 of what was almost a total lockdown in India. In fact, I recently saw a study that says 43% of the people in India are right now dealing with some measure of depression. In addition, you have millions of daily wage laborers who had no economic backup plan, no source of financial support. So our guys said, “Let us be the hands and feet of a loving God.” And these are just a few of dozens of dozens and dozens of pictures that they have sent to me of them going out to people who were in desperate situations and bringing to them food, bringing to them cleaning supplies, bringing to them education to know how to handle the pandemic. They have been out in that culture bringing people, in safe ways, the things that they need to survive a pandemic. In fact, our leaders and teams from LBC South Asia have been able to bring relief from the pandemic to 930 families. They raised 585,000 rupees, which is about the equivalent of 7,800 US dollars. On top of that, in the midst of the pandemic, a super cyclone hit two of the states where we work. That's their word for a hurricane, and it hit Odisha and West Bengal. Once again, our guys said this is a time for us to be the hands and feet of Jesus. They stepped up; they got involved. They helped rebuild 23 homes that had been damaged or destroyed by that hurricane. Right now, as we speak, there is monsoon flooding taking place in parts of South Asia that is causing devastation for many people. I received a video a week ago from one of our church planters, whose house was literally full of water. Once again they are neighboring; they are getting involved in helping people right now in the midst of very real and difficult situations.

Just as God has called us to neighboring right here in Lincoln, He's doing the same through our teams throughout South Asia. And the results over there have been absolutely incredible! You see, the guys determined we are not just going to do good works; we also want to bring good news. We want to explain to people the “why” behind our work, because it doesn't make sense in their culture, that people would come and bring you food and relief. So, they have been able to talk to many people about the love of Jesus Christ. In fact, in the last four months alone, during the pandemic, from April to July, they have engaged in over 6,000 gospel conversations and as a result, 1430 people from April to July indicated a decision to follow Jesus Christ. Now, it may be a long time before we really know how solid all of those 1430 decisions are, but one thing we know for certain. In a culture where you are persecuted, where there is open hostility and overt opposition to the Church of Jesus Christ and, in the midst of a pandemic lockdown, when someone makes a decision to be baptized, that is monumental! That is certain! That is them saying publicly, “I am all in. I am following Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.” And in the last four months, during a pandemic lockdown, 333 people through our LBC South Asia work have been baptized. And that's not even accurate because last night after the Saturday night service, I got a message from one of our leaders in India, and he told me that just in the last week in two, of the states where we're working, 43 more people have been baptized. (*clapping*) And so the gospel continues to go forward. Somehow, miraculously, even in the midst of a pandemic, 20 new church plants were launched just in the last four months. So, when we look at all of that, and we start to ask the question about why mission's matters, to me it comes back to pictures like these. These are just a few of the many pictures that I've been sent of the baptisms that have taken place over there, and when I look at these pictures, I am reminded of why all of this matters. It matters because every person matters to God. Every single person, from every people, in every place, matters to our great God!

In Revelation, chapter 5, John is seeing a vision and the vision is so disturbing to him that we're told that he is weeping. And the reason it is disturbing is because he sees a scene in which the question is asked, “Who can open the book of life?” In other words, “Who can bring salvation to the needy people of the world? And the answer is, “No one was found who was worthy, not on earth or in heaven or under the earth,” and John is literally weeping at the vision, but then he writes, beginning in verse 5:

One of the elders said to me, “Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals.” And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth. And He came and took the book out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne. When He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song saying, “Worthy are You to take the book and break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood *men* from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. “You have made them *to be* a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will rain upon the earth.” Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.” And every created thing which is in heaven, and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all the things in them, I heard saying, “To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, *be* blessing and honor and glory and dominion for ever and ever.” (Vs. 5-13)

Pastor John Piper has famously said that missions exist because worship does not. I am so thankful that our God is the God of the extraordinary, who is actually changing the lives of people all around the world. And He is willing to even use us, and that is why we fervently seek to make disciples of all nations. That is why we faithfully and boldly seek to be witnesses of His great news, not only locally, but to the very ends of the earth. And I am so thankful for how God has used us. I am so thankful that in the last 10 years, thousands of people from Lincoln Berean, through your prayers and through your giving, have had a chance to be a part of what He has done. And I'm so thankful that just about 100 of us have actually gotten on a plane—people from Lincoln Berean Church—and flown to the other side of the world to use your gifts in business, agriculture, education, compassion projects and gospel proclamation, to help us reach out and reach the unreached. I am so thankful for how we have gotten to be a part of what God has done. Can an ordinary group of people in an ordinary place like Lincoln, actually help change the world? Absolutely! To the extent that we will align our lives to the plans and the purposes of an extraordinary God! What a joy and a privilege it is to share with you what God has done in the last 10 years. It has truly been a *Decade on Purpose*. But now we sit in a new decade, and I find myself asking one question: “Who might God want to use in extraordinary ways to actually help change the world?”

Father, we just want to thank You for the privilege and the opportunity of being a part of what You have done. God, to You be the glory. It's what You have done. Lord, we get to be a part of the incredible, if and when we align ourselves to Your purposes and plans, not simply living for our own purposes and plans. Oh, God, I am so thankful for how so many have taken steps to get to be involved in what You're doing. Never could we have imagined the extraordinary outcomes that You had in mind. As we head toward a new decade, Lord, may we be people who understand You are the God of the extraordinary. May we not miss out on what You're about to do in the next ten years. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

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