

The Start of a New Vision

“This is what the Lord says ...’Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.’”
Isaiah 43:18-19

For the last four years, Pastors Dan McMillan and Ryan O’Malley have been shepherding their respective churches toward becoming lights in our community for the sake of God’s kingdom. Central Baptist and Pursuit Community.

Both Pastors met in 2014 with Ryan putting in flooring in Pastor Dan’s new home. Over the last four years Dan and Ryan have enjoyed a close friendship born out of sharing the ups and downs of ministry, partnering in community services, and fostering the same hopes for salvation to come to the people in our community. Dan watched while Ryan worked in the public schools, while at the same time leading a growing dynamic church and meeting in one rented space after another. Dan admired Ryan for his love of people, his warm smile and outgoing demeanor. Ryan watched Dan and Sharon as they came to this community with one goal in mind – love this community with all their hearts and strive to show Christ wherever they went.

It was in the early fall of 2017 that Ryan sought out Dan for some counsel concerning ministerial questions he was having. Thoughts were exchanged. Somewhere in that exchange of ideas, Ryan indicated a high regard for the connections that Dan has through Central Baptist’s denominational connections with Southern Baptists. Having strong affiliations with other churches where Pastors can meet and gain wisdom from one another was something that Ryan cherished and Dan could give testimony to.

That conversation continued to simmer on Dan’s mind. Dan offered a book of encouragement for Ryan to read. Several months went by before Ryan finally came into Dan’s office to pick up his book.

Over the course of those several months while waiting for Ryan to pick up his book, God had been working hard on Dan’s heart. Seeing Central Baptist hit an average low of 50-70 in attendance (where the church had once run over 300 in the early 1990s), seeing the building being used sparingly, and after countless prayer meetings where the prayer warriors of Central had been calling out to God for revival to break forth in the church and community, for souls to be saved, for God to send new families to the church, for God to allow an army of Christ followers to emerge from Central to spread the gospel, it was evident to Dan that something needed to happen in hopes of turning Central around. What was God up to? Prayer was gaining strength at Central. People began sensing God was up to something.

Then Ryan came to get his book in mid January. Dan had been praying hard, feeling bouts of discouragement, and his mind kept running back to their earlier conversation about Ryan wishing that he had the same kind of connections that Dan and Central had with being a part of a network of churches like the Northwest Baptist Convention. Then it dawned on Dan...“why not give that opportunity to Ryan and his church? Why not explore the idea of uniting our churches under one roof at Central, becoming one body, and Ryan and Dan serving our Lord together with one heart and a united team of leaders? So when Ryan walked into Dan’s office to get his book, Dan felt the Lord prompt him to ask Ryan a question. “Ryan, would you give prayerful consideration to the idea of our two churches merging together for the sake of God’s kingdom?”

Out of that question a conversation ensued. Then more conversations. Ryan expressed that his church had entertained thoughts in the past of joining with another church in town, but those plans had come to an end. Dan and Ryan began meeting weekly to talk and pray. Then their wives joined in as they began having meals together as couples and spending time in prayer.

Dan contacted Keith Evans, a former Pastor at Central and a strong leader within the Northwest Baptist Convention. Keith had been through three mergers at his church. He came and met with Ryan and Dan and listened to their hearts. He encouraged Dan and Ryan to read through the book “Better Together” which they did. They also read a book called “Mergers.” Keith said “this could be the beginning of something really exciting if God is in it.”

The Spirit of God was now stirring Dan and Ryan’s hearts and the hearts of their wives. After meeting and praying a number of times, Dan and Ryan determined that the circle should expand, other leaders should be brought on board to give prayerful thought to the idea of seeing a brand new church emerge – one which will be stronger, larger, more vibrant, led by leaders under God’s control, and totally energized to reach our community for Christ.

The vision is still taking shape. But here are some areas where Dan and Ryan see our churches complementing one another:

1. Both churches share very similar theological beliefs.
2. Both churches share a common desire for reaching our community with the gospel.
3. Both churches have people within who know one another, work together, have children who play sports together.
4. Both churches share a similar style of worship where contemporary songs and hymns can be blended to touch hearts.
5. Central has a facility whereas Pursuit does not. Coming under one roof provides space for the new church to expand and grow, both on Sundays and throughout the week.
6. Pastor Dan brings years of experience, Pastor Ryan brings a fresh, youthful innovative vision. Both have tremendous respect and admiration for each other.
7. Both churches view the importance of having midweek groups.
8. Both churches love children and seek to teach them God’s Word. Ryan’s children love our vacation Bible school, other children from Pursuit attend.
9. Both churches value being missional in the community, having people all throughout the community who are serving and leading in some way. All in attempts to let their lights shine for Christ.
10. Both churches believe in the power of prayer and that God loves to do “new” things in the midst of his people (Isaiah 43).

Here are some common questions that have been discussed by Dan and Ryan:

1. What will Dan and Ryan’s roles look like in the new church?

Dan and Ryan have talked extensively about this. Both want to be honoring of one another’s strengths and being able to look out ahead into the future. Dan brings longevity and many years of Pastoral experience while Ryan brings a dynamic ability to reach younger generations with a powerful teaching style. It is believed that the best course for the new church is to have Ryan be the primary teacher and lead vision caster on Sundays,

while Dan lead in administrative and pastoral care areas of the church. In other words – Ryan will be the more visible of the two and will be seen more as the “face” of the new church.

2. How will the church be led?

While Dan and Ryan may continue to have prominent roles, in reality, both of them will now serve on a team of Elders/Pastors who will all share as equals as they together lead the church. This team of Pastor/Elders will be made up of men from both churches who come together to express their diverse strengths while combining their hearts to serve as one. Depending on what the need is in the church, any one of the Pastors will be prepared to give leadership to that specific need. This way, no one Pastor will shoulder all the load. It will be a shared load.

The Elder team will serve the body, not rule the body. While the Elders will be the final decision-makers on routine matters of business and church operations, they will seek input from the body at every crossroad where major decisions are needed. Then after intense, prayerful, consideration, they will make decisive decisions. While each Elder will share equal status on the leadership team, certain roles will be more prominent and visible such as the lead teaching Pastor and Administrative Pastor. This is the model we see evidenced all throughout the scriptures.

3. Will Dan and Ryan continue to be paid their salaries? And will other paid staff retain their positions?

From the reading of Better Together, it is suggested by merger experts that whenever churches merge, every effort be made to keep paid employees in their current positions until at least the end of the current calendar year, or at least until a rhythm can settle into motion. This ensures that plenty of time can be given to assessing each person’s place in the new church. Dan and Ryan are envisioning that both of their positions as Lead Pastors will include salaries. This will be a point of discussion and prayer among the entire Elder Team asking for God’s direction.

4. Will the church remain affiliated with the Northwest Baptist Convention?

Yes. We will remain committed to Central’s roots in this way. We will remain steadfast in our support of the Willamette Valley Baptist Association of churches, Northwest churches and SBC entities all throughout the world. We believe this partnership will be vital to our health and growth in the years to come. Our Pastors will look forward to meeting with other Pastors in our network for support and encouragement, and will continue to take leading roles to partner with other churches. We will remain mission focused.

5. What will the name of the new church be?

This is a sensitive question. For long time members at Central who have walked under the banner of Central Baptist, there are some identity issues at stake. For those who chose to walk under the name of Pursuit Community, there are also identity issues. Central chose its name long ago due to geographical considerations. Pursuit chose its name on the basis of its mission to pursue the lost and to pursue the high calling of Christ Jesus. Some have now suggested we attempt to combine the two.

Dan and Ryan have given some discussion to this, but have nothing to recommend at this point, but both feel that if we want to see a brand new church emerge it might be worth considering finding a name - a new name perhaps that we all can agree upon that will capture our vision for reaching our community.

Dan and Ryan both agree that having the word “Baptist” in the name proves to be a huge hurdle for many who seek to find a church home, or for seekers who simply want to check a faith-based organization out. Unfortunately, due to the stigma that surrounds Baptists in this day and age (especially Southern Baptists)

people are increasingly turned off by denomination labels. Our hope is that we can remove whatever barriers people might have to attending our church. This in no way means that we are embarrassed to identify with our roots within the SBC. If you look across our denomination, an increasing number of churches have taken steps to change their names to include words that are welcoming and God directed rather than denomination labels.

6. Who will be the primary Worship Leader on Sunday mornings?

Central currently uses a rotation of musicians within the church, and some from outside the church. While this provides some diversity, it also requires an intense level of coordination on Pastor Dan's part. Pursuit has a talented leader on staff who coordinates their entire music ministry. It is believed by Dan and Ryan that Pursuit's Worship leader should initially be allowed to take the lead role, while utilizing musicians and singers from both churches to form one team that utilizes their many talents. This arrangement will ultimately be a decision by the Elder Team after interacting with our musicians.

7. Are Pastors Dan and Ryan prepared to stay and see this new church through?

Yes. Dan and Ryan have both expressed to one another their love for this community and the desire to stay the course. Ryan is turning 40 this year and has expressed his desire to stay in this community for a long time and to watch his kids grow up in this community. He is invested here. Dan is turning 61 this year and understands that in a number of years to come his role may change. As he looks out into the future he sees a time where it will be essential to hand off a baton of leadership to those coming behind. This is a good thing. Dan and Sharon love this town and, Lord willing, they want to stay for a long time. Both the McMillans and the O'Malleys want desperately for God to move mightily in the lives of people they invest in.

8. How will the various volunteers from both churches merge together? Won't there be some tensions?

Yes. Think of how blended family members have to make concessions in order to get along and function as one whole family. Ryan and Dan believe that the organizational structure of the new church will need to be evaluated and re-aligned to optimize our effectiveness for reaching people for Christ. While we would want no one to feel left out, it will be imperative for everyone to put on humility and to seek the unity of the body and the Spirit of peace. Re-alignment and positions of service will be evaluated at all levels by the Elders. Each person will be encouraged to use their gifts. We believe that through prayer and trusting in God to lead us, people will find their places of service.

Initially, change will bring with it some confusion and miscommunication. We should expect this in the early stages. Someone may feel left out or made to feel under-valued. We will graciously seek to spur one another on and live out the "one anothers" found in the scriptures.

9. Will church membership be emphasized or required?

Both churches bring to the table some differences on membership. Ryan and Dan have discussed these differences. Many churches have membership rolls, while many prefer to de-emphasize a membership roll in the church. We are agreed that when you join your life with Christ, you become members of one another in this beautiful universal body of Christ – called the church. Central has a long history of encouraging people to join and become church members (albeit no one seems to know just who's on the current membership roll at Central). Pursuit does not emphasize a formal membership. Ryan and Dan enthusiastically support the importance of "covenant". There is a very important aspect to church life where people "covenant" together. Throughout the Bible you find that God's people live in covenant relationship with one another. We covenant to walk together, to speak well of each other, to be faithful to support our church together, and to support our

church leaders. This relational bond is uniquely special. So the idea of “covenanting together” carries a lot of weight in Ryan and Dan’s eyes. This is an area where the Elders will seek God in prayer and attempt to discern what path we should take together.

10. How will the church building be shared?

The building is the Lord’s, not ours. The formation of this new church means that people from Central and Pursuit can come together to be one and share in the joys of having the building serve as our base of operation in fulfilling the great commission. There will no longer be “us” and “them.”

Ryan has asked Dan some very pointed questions as to how will the people of Central react to the people of Pursuit coming in and taking their place within the building? Will there be an openness? Are there any sacred cows that should be avoided? Will fresh ideas be welcome? Are there any places in the building that are off-limits? Dan’s answer to those questions is that “our home is your home.” We will choose to dwell together in peace and will look forward to whatever fresh ideas the people of Pursuit may bring in creating spaces that are welcoming for all. Dan has indicated to Ryan that he should envision the building as a blank canvas, teeming with possibilities. We at Central should welcome the “fresh eyes” and creative talents that the people of Pursuit have to offer. When we all get to the point of saying “this is OUR church building, gifted to us by the hand of God” then we will have reached an important milestone in the life of our new church.

Conclusion:

Please give prayerful thought to what the Lord may be doing around us, and how he wants to work through us in order to bring many more people to Jesus. We are convinced that the old adage is true – “Together is Better.”

Ecclesiastes 4:9 “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor.”