

## The MBC State of the Union Spring 2017

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To: Staff, Elders, Deacons, Deaconesses  
From: Nathan Didlake

Dear Elders, Staff, Deaconesses, and Deacons:

Throughout my time at MBC, I have been overjoyed to serve alongside you. During 2016, serious time has been spent seeking to figure out what our “direction” (or “next steps”) must be. We are privileged to a church filled with so many people who are serious about their faith – but I *yearn* for our church to continue to grow in size and in depth. As you’ll read below, the journey to a church vision has been a fascinating rediscovery of what Christianity’s call is at its core. And it’s with a heart of gratefulness to God for giving us the privilege of doing *any of this*, that I present to you the “MBC State of the Union.”

Everything we have and are is Jesus’s. All that we can do – and must do – must come from him. Considering the fact that we have been given the highest of all privileges – to (basically) represent the voice of God to people, prophetically and in care, where we are going and how we get there must be clearly defined.

So where are we going? And how are we going to get there? Read along, and let’s mature in Christ together.

Running to maturity together, always and affectionately yours,

Nathan Didlake  
Pastor

## *Where We Are Going, As We Worship, Community, Missions Together...*

### **MY PURSUIT OF A VISION IN 2016:**

When I was candidating to be MBC's pastor, one of the main questions asked was, "Where do you feel God has called us to go?" I answered this in many different ways – sometimes in terms of strategy, other times in terms of holistic, heaven-came-down inspiring charges to rouse up the troops. The problem was this: despite all my work in the last two years to find a "vision," I couldn't land one. Halfway through 2016, I found myself creeping into the end of my second year as senior pastor. When someone would ask "Where are we going?" I could not give them a simple answer

Increasingly, this frustrated me, but I continued to say from the pulpit that our church needed to be on the "front lines of the needs of its community." But as days progressed and no singular vision came, I began to question my calling. Did the lack of "vision" mean I was an illegitimate choice for the role of pastor? I love what I do, but if I can't articulate the answer to this question, how could I ever lead people there? Isn't this what a shepherd is supposed to know?

So I hit the books and the streets to seek that "big thing" – that vision I was supposed to find and infuse. Of the twenty (or so) big ideas, a handful were genuinely *big*. Counseling ministries. Senior adult ministries. Handicap ministries. Homeless ministries. These were obvious needs in our church and our larger community. Our church was supposed to be "on the front lines." With renewed excitement, I began to research each idea.

However, as the research progressed, fear grew. It was as if I could feel God's Spirit prodding me: "**Nathan, how are you going to do this and not exhaust my people? Those are my people: you don't have the right to drive them to the point of breaking.**" Exhaustion is different from the tiredness that comes from the end of hard work. Exhaustion in a church breeds disillusionment and disgust. It takes good people and hurts them. If there is going to be a vision, it must be carried out by people. Still, as meaningful as the visions were, the only forecast I could conjure was an exhausted church, burning out... "in Jesus' name."

Alongside fear came a thick melancholy. I couldn't *stay excited about all these visions I'd pursued*. Why? **These visions didn't smack of the Holy Spirit's leading.** Good things though they were, I knew that MBC going down those roads would mean MBC going without the Spirit's power. The visions would replace "waiting on the Lord" and would become idols in their own right, meaningful and necessary as the work is. At one point, I felt as if God's Spirit said: "Nathan, if you lead this church down these paths, you'll be going alone."

With fear and melancholy came a more practical problem: **what if the vision doesn't match the people God actually brings in?** For example, if our church spent thousands of hours and thousands of dollars on a recovery ministry – what would we do if God saved 100 *clean* individuals? I realized that every interpretation of *what God might actually do* would render our church's work useless. Another practical problem was success: **what if we actually brought people in – without the Spirit's empowering?** False success would only hurt our church – not grow it; and without the Holy Spirit's leading, the visions would only distract from God's calling – not fulfill it.

I realized that God wasn't in the visions I'd conjured from my magic hat. Discouraged – frustrated with the problem of having a job with no vision for said job, I realized further I needed to take some time to stop and pray. I might not be able to articulate a long-term vision, but my personal identity in Christ is not wrapped up in my job as a senior pastor anyway. I needed to abide

in Christ, to walk by the Spirit, to wait on the Lord and be satisfied in him – not finding my identity, worth, or personal value in my job.

That's when I landed.

## THE PROBLEM WITH CHURCH VISIONS

Church visions tend to set up a false dichotomy: The call of God for the individual Christian is to grow in grace, abide in Christ, walk by the Spirit, so on... *but* the call of God for the Christian church to embrace a completely *other* work that true Christians will do, if they're genuinely committed to their faith. Essentially, it becomes this kind of equation:

$$\begin{array}{r} \text{The personal calling} \\ + \text{The church's calling} \\ \hline \text{The Mark of a "Good" Christian} \end{array}$$

This equation distorts the gospel. Jesus does not call Christians to “abide in me” individually – only to call them to do something drastically different corporately. Christianity says: “Jesus + Nothing = Everything.” The local church must not add to this gospel in hopes of doing good works. The local church must not add to this gospel in hopes of rousing sleepy congregants to action. To add to the gospel is to pervert it: churches can pervert this same gospel when they tell people that what God wants from them privately – as well as publicly – are two different things.

## THE CHURCH IS LIKE A RESTAURANT

Consider, for a moment, a restaurant. When a restaurant opens in an area, its is to be the best possible restaurant in that area. How is this done? *Making good food and having a good vibe.* They might have game nights and karaoke nights, but the core of their identity is in their food. If the food is good and the vibe is good, then the restaurant will be firmly established as a place for great food and good vibes. When the owners wake up, they further the restaurant by making sure the food is top-notch. The moment the food ceases to be top-notch, the restaurant's credibility wanes – and people will stop driving from afar to dine there.

Churches are like restaurants. If what we're doing is really good, rich, meaningful, beautiful, authentic, joy-filled, wrought out of conviction, then people will come from all over the place to share in our community. However, church leadership (myself included, up until recently) loves to imagine itself as Movie Production Companies, thinking “If we put millions of dollars and thousands of hours into *this production*, then we will bring the masses.” And despite all that effort and coordination from thousands of people, expending millions of dollars, most movies receive a “Meh!” (or below) rating. Our church must abandon this model: our food is the bread of life; our calling to eat this bread ourselves and to joyfully give it to anyone the Lord brings our way.

One year from now, we want people to experience our worship, community, and mission and feel the upward call to maturity in Christ. We want the same ten years from now – and twenty years from now. Personally, I would consider it one of the highest honors if, in the future, a person returned to our church and could say, “They're still doing the same thing they were doing years ago: and it's still good. Maybe, even better!”

## THE PRIVATE CALL IS THE CORPORATE CALL

Christians are called to do the same thing, privately or corporately: abide in Christ. When people become Jesus' disciples, they are given a new life that is hidden in Jesus Christ. **Growing in this is the Christian call.** Walk by the Spirit; obey the commands of Christ; walk in the law of liberty; etc.: these are all describing the same reality that comes from one's identity in Jesus, as a child of God. Christians are healthiest together when they are resting in their identity in Christ, living obediently as he's called them to live by the Holy Spirit's power. This is Christian maturity: action comes out of who we are in Jesus.

The call for the local church is the same as it is for the individual Christian: maturity. How does a church pursue maturity? By disciplining people toward maturity so that they might live out mature Christianity in their community as missionaries. Together, we grow together; then together we go out into our respective mission fields to bring God's love to a loveless world.

The private call and the corporate call are the same: Christian maturity.

## MBC'S CALLING

**MBC's long-range vision is to be a church that's busting with mature Christians.** Our job is to pursue Christian maturity as a congregation so that individuals might abide in Christ, walk by the Spirit, and serve God as missionaries in their community. To use another metaphor, MBC is like a tree. Christ's call is for us to deepen our roots... down, down, down. The deeper the roots, the healthier the tree; the healthier the tree, the stronger the branches; then God can extend them however and over whomever, as he pleases. **Our corporate vision is to abide in Christ together to foster mature Christians – and then to empower them for good works that God has prepared for them before the foundation of the world.**

Christian maturity cannot produce a church that's insular, self-focused, self-praising, and irrelevant to the community. Maturity isn't stagnant. The mature Christian community sinks its roots deep into Jesus so that it might do good works. The mature Christian community sends out not one or two missionaries – but hundreds of missionaries every week. The mature Christian community empowers its members to consider any place where there is no salt and light – and sends them into those areas to bring Christ's love to all who are present.

MBC must be a church that sinks its roots deep into the heart of the gospel, disciplining Christians toward maturity. We can *and will* try fresh approaches to ministry to keep our hearts and imaginations inspired, but the goal is the same: maturity. We can *and will* further develop ministries (even create new ministries) to meet the needs of our community. But our identity is not in those ministries – our identity is in Christ. Those ministries *must* come out of our identity in Christ.

## *Marks of Christian Maturity: 2017 Worship, Community, Missions*



This is our “mission statement logo.” Three people, embracing around a core journey toward the cross. Surrounding the logo are three words that define the pillars of our corporate identity and pursuit: worship, community, and missions. If people want to know what MBC’s threefold priorities are, these words give it.

We introduced this logo about a year ago. **Now, it’s time to define these words in a meaningful way.** What kind of worship? What kind of community? What kind of missions? Remember: our goal is maturity in Christ, so the definition of these words will inform how we imagine maturity looks.

### **MBC is about “Solid, Spirit-Filled” worship.**

The word “worship” refers to our corporate “adore and magnify Jesus” events. Primarily, these events happen on Sunday, and they include a host of expressions (preaching, prayer, reading, music, baptisms, communion, repentance, etc.) The object of our worship is Jesus; the aim of our preparation is helping people gaze at the beauty of Jesus; the substance is the gospel. **Our goal should be to have solid worship services that submit to the Holy Spirit so that people can rejoice in Christ.** It needs to be solid. In 2017 and in 2037, people should be able to trust their leadership to do a **solid job** of bringing a **solid service** to the glory and honor of Jesus in obedience and submission to the Holy Spirit. Nothing pretentious; nothing flashing for its own sake; just meaningful, solid worship. **Our church must be known for solid, Spirit-filled worship.**

### **MBC is about “Intentional, Gracious” community.**

The word “community” refers to our ongoing participation in each other’s lives for the sake of advocating and being the gospel for our community. Primarily, this refers to our Life Groups and other studies/groups. The Lord has blessed MBC’s Life Groups beyond anyone’s wildest expectations. It is the single largest ministry within our church. Our commitment to Life Groups remains firm, and as any ministry is born, we will always prioritize the Life Group rhythm so that nothing competes with Life Groups. Nevertheless,

to further foster mature community at MBC, we must call people to “intentional, gracious community.”

By “intentional community,” I mean a “purposeful commitment to obeying Christ by doing life together with Christians.” Community takes commitment – and thus must be brought into one’s life “intentionally.” Community needs substance – and thus must be bolstered by “intentionally chosen” studies. Community needs balance – and thus must be “intentionally geared” toward striking that right balance between accountability, Bible Study, and good old fashion fun. So, because we live in a world where Christian Community is typically is mocked, we must call our church to intentional commitment to intentional community.

By “gracious community,” I mean the fostering and development of Life Groups that invite people into transparent living. People must know that they can speak honestly with other Christians. People must know that they can share their hurts, burdens, and doubts into a room full of non-judgmental, caring, grace-advocating peers. People must be shown how to open up the damage done by sin so that the gospel can come in... Christian community is the place to do this. For Life Groups, maturity means being intentional and being gracious. We would be the rarest kind of church if we fostered this.

### **MBC is about “Joyfully-Tense, Indigenous” missions.**

The word “missions” refers to our work to be God’s “hands and feet” serving our local and global community. MBC has been called by God to bring the gospel to Southern Ocean County (our home) *and* to foreign people groups (others’ homes). We are called to *both*, and this is meant by “Joyfully-Tense” missions. Our commitment is to the global church, just as our commitment is to the local church. Our local mission is essential: if we ignore our home for the nations we have botched our mission. Our global mission is essential: if we ignore the nations for our home we have botched our mission. As we mature as a corporate body, MBC must not argue about which mission (homeside or foreign) is more important. Instead, we must pursue a healthy tension (or, balance) between the two, giving glory to God – that he has allowed to do any of these things in the first place. Good dialogue on this matter should not sacrifice one for the other: good dialogue will look to bring both sides of our mission to their healthiest place so both thrive.

Further, our missions must be indigenous. Modern missions has moved (rightly) to sending missionaries to train up “the locals” to do the work in their homeland. They are the best fit for the job because they know the language, culture, and history. **For global missions**, we are committed to partnering with “the locals” in planting and growing churches in their community, as we send people into the mission field for them to join this front-lines partnership. **For local missions**, we are committed to raising up “the locals” to grow the church in Southern Ocean County, through training, mentorship, and empowerment for front-lines work. They are best suited for the job because they already know the language, culture, and history. Our job is to call people to consider where God might be calling them – and then to empower them to be the salt and light of Christ in those places. A mature church sees its home and foreign lands as missions and celebrates God’s calling to serve both.

## HELPING JOHNNY MATURE

Now, how might all of this work? Imagine God saving a guy named Johnny using MBC. Now, Johnny is a part of our community. What do we tell Johnny? How do we bring him to maturity? We do this through teaching him how participate in **solid, Spirit-Filled worship**; we do this through discipling him and advocating him in **intentional, gracious community**; and we teach him to express his gifts through **joyfully-tense, indigenous missions**. Johnny's call by God is to abide in him, walking by the Spirit in life. This is the call of all Christians. And when you join Christians together in a church setting their corporate calling is the same thing.

Now, say Johnny, learning to walk in maturity, begins to feel God's Spirit leading him to do ministry to people *over here* or *over there*. It might be ministry to Christians. It might be ministry to the lost. Either way, the church backs Johnny and supports him for the mission. Empowering Johnny for ministry is simply us continuing to do what we do as worshipful people, living in community, doing joyfully-tense indigenous missions.

But what if there is a ministry that our church needs to be doing? Perhaps among the homeless. Perhaps among addicts. What then? Then, the church extends its mission arm and does that thing in the loving name of Jesus. **However, that thing does not become our identity. Worship, community, and missions done by people growing in maturity is our identity.** This is the opposite of stagnation: it's an open hand, asking from God his direction and receiving from him what he desires. If God redirects after we've completed the task, then we with open hands keep on the business of walking by the Spirit and following him, finding our identity in the God who leads us, not in what we do. As mentioned above, we are a tree that is sinking its roots, deeper and deeper. The better the taproot, the better the tree. And when God calls *this tree*, MBC, to extend its branches, then we have our *call to good works*. Our good works *grow out of* our source, deepening maturity in Christ. A healthy will minister to the people God brings.

*For 2017:*

*Let's pursue maturity in all we do.*

### WE ARE A CHURCH:

We are a church: our mission is to be a church. Our actions? Church stuff. The front lines? People. Our aim: maturity. We are not a psychotherapeutic group, though we partner with those. We are not a counseling center, though we offer *some* counseling. We are not a food bank, though we will not reject anyone who comes through our doors in search for love and help. We are a church, and **worshiping in community** as we take on the **mission** together in growing maturity... that is what MBC must be about.

### GROWING IN MATURITY:

For everyone who is placed in some form of a leadership position, the call comes most strongly: mature. Abide in Christ. I call everyone in leadership to stop and reflect: where have I exchanged my identity in Christ for a false identity? Who you are is not what you do. Who you are is not how much you serve or how many people are grateful they've met you. That's all fine – but your identity, the true you, is found only in Jesus Christ.

Dear Leaders, sink your roots deeply into Jesus in 2017. Read the scriptures with greater energy and fervor. Pray diligently, even if prayer has always been strange to you. Confess your sin

and doubt to your brothers and sisters so that Christian for the sake of fleeing loneliness and the despair that comes from guilt. In all things, sink your roots deeply into Jesus for maturity.

And then – and only then, allow the Lord to mature your ministry. After you have spent quality face time with our Lord and have opened up your heart to his, ask him how you might further mature the ministries he’s given to you. Where do you need to ratchet things up so that the ministry is more effective? Who have you lost along the way (for remember: our ministry aim is the maturity of people)? The elders are committed to empowering you personally and corporately to grow into maturity – so we are committed to meeting with you, for prayer and advocacy, so that you might grow in your worship, community, and mission.

### **CHANGING HOW WE EMPOWER:**

MBC’s responsibility is to aid its Christians to grow into maturity. As such, I am reaffirming our commitment to be intentional on all “events” and worship services. This means that in 2017, we are going to work diligently to utilize our worship, community, and missions events to be intentional so as to aid people in their ongoing growth in Christ. One example of this will be the 2017 “Find the One” campaign...

### **THE “FIND THE ONE” CAMPAIGN**

In 2017, we are going to ask our congregation to “find the one person that God is calling them to bring to faith *this year*.” This idea will be introduced in January (during our Missions Emphasis Month), but it will become central beginning in the summer. During the summertime, we will begin a series of very practical sermons aimed toward bolstering people’s courage and technique in walking by the spirit – with an emphasis on sharing their faith. In the Fall, we will launch a churchwide campaign (possibly entitled *Join the Family*) specifically geared toward empowering church members to bring their unchurched friends to special events that are winsome, interesting, and guest friendly. This will reach into the Life Groups, where groups will be encouraged to invite one friend to group to create pathways for people to hear the gospel and enter into our Christian community.

**What Leaders Need to Know:** All leaders will lead the way in this initiative. We will empower those who benefit from our ministry to share their faith, but we must also do the thing we request. There will be further training for this in the Spring semester for all MBC leaders – and then for the whole MBC community.

## *In Conclusion:*

### **WHERE WE ARE GOING**

MBC exists to mature in Christ through solid, Spirit filled worship; in intentional, gracious community; and through joyfully-tense, indigenous missions. The our corporate and individual identities are found in God – in whom we are called to abide.

Our pursuit is Christian maturity; our glorious, eternal prize, Jesus.