

"Extravagant Generosity"  
*Bucket Lists: Vision and Hope Are Inspirations of the Heart*  
**Joel 2:28**  
John Breon

The phrase "bucket list" has become a popular way of talking about the things people want to do before they die ("kick the bucket"). There was even a movie about two terminally ill men who decide to tackle their bucket list and do the things they've always wanted to do.

Does the church have a bucket list? Not in the sense of things to do before we die. But what are the things we are called to do as a church? What does God want to accomplish through First United Methodist Church, Durant-Caddo? What is God's vision for the Church and for this church?

The story of Pentecost in Acts 2 helps us begin to see God's vision. God's Spirit is poured out on a waiting group of Jesus' followers. This event makes these followers of Jesus into the Church. They begin to praise God and proclaim boldly the good news of Jesus. They see thousands of people turn to Christ. They see their prayers answered. They see people healed. They stand boldly before authorities who try to quiet them and stop what they are doing. And this Church begins to grow and spread across the world, making a difference everywhere they go. At one point they are described as people who have turned the world upside-down (Acts 17:6).

In Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, he declares that the prophecy of Joel is beginning to be fulfilled. God's Spirit is being poured out. A result of the Spirit's outpouring is that sons and daughters prophesy, young men see visions, old men dream dreams. God's servants—both men and women—receive the Spirit and prophesy. Moses had once said, "I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them! (Numbers 11:29). Moses' wish begins to come true at Pentecost.

The Church is a prophetic movement. In the Church, Old Testament promises are being fulfilled. In the Church, God's word is spoken forth and practiced. The Church is forward-looking—not predicting the future but reading the times in the light of God's word and being people of hope.

The same Spirit who inspired the prophets, filled and inspired Peter and the other followers of Jesus. The same Spirit is active in us through faith in Jesus Christ. God still wants to have his people seeing visions and dreaming dreams.

We're using *vision* today to talk about a goal, a purpose, a defining statement of who we are as a church. Such a vision is given to us by God, revealed and inspired by God's Spirit. Such a vision calls us to look ahead, to plan, to lean forward in hope.

What is God's vision for your life? What are you becoming? What kind of person will you be? What is God's vision for this church? What kind of church will we be?

In the play *Death of a Salesman*, Willie Loman has committed suicide. His wife asks their son Biff, "Why did he do it?" And Biff answers, "Aw shucks, Mom, he had all the wrong dreams!" (cited by Tony Campolo on TV years ago).

One day in chapel at ORU a couple of drama students did a reading from Francis Xavier. They came in a side door, one crashed some cymbals and the other began shouting a line from Xavier: "Give up your small ambitions!"

God is calling us all to give up our small ambitions and be a church of vision. A church of vision dares to dream with God, to dream big, to imagine what God is calling us to be and what we can do as God enables us and we are faithful.

As you imagine the future, where do you see God leading this church, what do you see the church doing in twenty years? five years? next year?

The most obvious event in the next year or so is the construction of our new building. After years of prayer, study, debate, research, fund-raising, and lots of work by many people, we break ground today for the first phase of a new ministry site for First UMC. Years ago, people in this congregation had the vision of a new site and facility for ministry. Others bought into that vision and supported it. And now it's happening! I'm grateful that I get to be in on it.

Now what? When construction is complete in a little over a year, it won't be time to sit back and relax. Hopefully, we can catch our breath

financially before starting on phase two. But the year or so of construction and then when we move into the new building is really a new season of ministry.

A church I served some years ago built a new sanctuary right before we moved there. In fact, the congregation's first Sunday in the new building was my first Sunday at the church. They had been worshiping in the fellowship hall for several months. It was smaller, people sat closer together and there was a feeling of closeness. Then they moved into the new more spacious sanctuary and they were more spread out. They literally weren't as close as they had been. Also, the people there seemed to have the idea that just having a new building would draw all kinds of new people in. But they were disappointed.

I'm sure you've talked about this all through this process, but we need to be clear that a building by itself can't do ministry. The idea that "if we build it they will come" has a little merit, but not as much as we might think. Buildings don't do ministry; people do. For our ministry to be fruitful here or in Caddo or in the new building, we have to be committed to reaching people and helping them grow. We need a vibrant ministry to fill the church here or west of town or in Caddo. And, we need that vibrant ministry to send us out from whatever building we're in to witness and serve in the community.

A building by itself doesn't guarantee growth, though it provides an opportunity for growth and new ministry. Even growth is not an end in itself. But a healthy church, committed to God's vision, will grow in the ways God wants us to. I'm sensing God calling us in the coming year to *grow deep* and to *grow out*. These have to do with our *root* and our *fruit*.

All of us are always called to grow deeper in our life in Christ, deeper in faith, deeper in commitment and devotion. One or two hours on Sunday and five minutes a day with *The Upper Room* is a good start. But we need more for the kind of deep growth and character transformation God intends for us. Salvation is more than just getting our ticket punched or getting our fire insurance. God is out to make us become like Jesus.

God gives us ways to experience the Holy Spirit's transforming power. There are the "means of grace" that include prayer, studying the Bible,

worship, and serving others. Our membership vows cover the basics of growing deep. If we're committed to growing in a life of prayer, being present in Christian community for worship and support and accountability, practicing extravagant generosity in giving, serving where God calls with the gifts God gives us, and sharing faith and inviting others, we are on our way to growing deeper in Christ.

In the coming year, I plan to preach a series on prayer to help us learn and grow in that area. Prayer is one of the main ways we know God and grow deep in Christ through the Holy Spirit. I hope you plan to be here for that series starting in January and bring somebody with you. I'll do my best to answer questions about prayer. Together we'll discover more about how to live as prayerful people.

Other ways we already have in place to grow deep are Sunday School classes. And we're starting new one in January. The target is younger adults (from mid-twenties to mid-thirties or so). Information about that will go out soon, but contact the church office if you're interested. Sunday School in Caddo is growing and there's great potential there for more growth.

Besides Sunday School, we have Wednesday night studies for all ages that cover a range of topics all under the umbrella of Grow, Proclaim, Serve. That's a great opportunity to learn and grow.

Part of my vision for us as a church is to develop more small groups to help us grow deep. These could be prayer groups, Bible studies, discipleship groups, spiritual formation groups. There are lots of ways to talk about them. I invite you to consider prayerfully how you could be involved in that ministry of the church—attending or leading or hosting. We'll keep exploring ways to do this in the coming year.

So we are called and committed to growing deep. And we're not limited to the things I've mentioned. At the same time, I believe God calls us to grow out. Growing deep speaks of our root; growing out speaks of fruit. We want to branch out and bear fruit in new ways and new places. This means going outside the church building and inviting people, working with people, serving people in many ways. We have potential to be a regional church that serves and draws people from all over the county.

The population of Durant and Caddo and the surrounding area has grown a lot and is expected to keep growing. There is great potential to reach new people, help them come to Christ and grow deep in him. I believe God is calling us in the coming years to reach hundreds of new people, not just a handful.

As John Williams has said recently, relocation gives us a window of opportunity to reach out to the community. We need to be ready to seize that opportunity. We'll need to let the surrounding community know we are here. We'll use advertising, possibly some direct mail and whatever other creative ways we can to get the word out. When our new building starts going up, it will attract attention. We have a new activity center in Caddo on our radar as well. Still, the best way to reach people is to talk to them. The vast majority of people who visit a church do so because someone they know invites them.

Then when new people get here, what do we do? How do we welcome them? Let's practice now talking to people we aren't acquainted with. When someone new shows up, don't just point them where they need to go, walk with them, show them. If someone sits in your seat, welcome them, don't run them off.

Then we'll need more intentional follow-up when new people show up. Our Evangelism Team already does a great job of delivering bags of goodies and church info to people who visit. We will need more people involved in that.

We'll need to offer more new classes and groups. Our current classes are wonderful and we feel close to each other in them. But that closeness makes it tough for new people to get in and feel like they're part of the group. So we need new groups that new people can be part of from the start.

It's going to take all of us exercising all the prayerful creativity we can to fill the new building and to make it a base of operations for mission and ministry for the whole county. God has guided and provided in the process of relocation so far. Let's trust God to continue guiding and providing next year and for years to come.

One more thing in reaching and receiving and equipping new people. We'll need to be clear about what being a member of the church means. Anyone can attend, participate, and benefit from the church's ministry. But members of the church are committed in a special way to the church's vision and mission. In the church, membership does not have its privileges; it has responsibilities. When you join the church, you're saying, "I choose to live out my life in Christ with this group of people. I will be a disciple in this community of faith. I will participate in this church's ministry in specific ways." Some of you have been thinking about that commitment. Maybe now is the time to take that step. I invite you to do it today—or at least, let me know you're considering it then we can talk about your next step.

All of us are invited to grow, to grow deep in Christ and find new ways to do that; to grow out in bearing fruit and to let God show us ways we can do that.