

Decisions, Decisions

May 1, 2011

Let's pray together.

Jesus, that song is our prayer ... that you would be the center of our lives and the place we fix our eyes. Sometimes it's hard for us to do that when things happen that we don't understand at first. But you are still Lord and King over us even in those times. Help us rest in that truth. We ask that you would hold us together as individuals and as a church. Amen.

Before I begin I want to say thanks to Matt, Josh and Laurie from Hannibal-LaGrange University who led our music this morning. Yesterday was their final concert at HLG, so

they weren't able to make the trip to this side of the state until early this morning. They left Hannibal at 4:30am so they could be here by 8:15 to set up and check sound. Could we thank them for their efforts? You guys feel free to take a nap for the next 30 minutes if you need to.

Of course, the fact that we have them here this morning instead of our regular band is a hint of what I want to talk to you about today. Actually, if you've signed up and given us your email on The City– our online communications system here at NHCC – you don't need a hint because you already know that I want to talk to you today about the fact that we're in the process of making some big changes ... beginning with a leadership change in our music ministry – which is why Rob is not here this morning. We're also in the process of closing our Early Childhood Center – our last day is May 13th. And May

13th also happens to be Michelle Muller's last day with us as Director of Children's Ministry as she has accepted a full-time teaching position with Teen Challenge, a job that is much more aligned with what she believes God has called her to do with her life.

That's a lot of change happening in a very short amount of time and on the surface it might look like chaos has ensued. At the very least it would cause you to think "wow, *what* is up?" At the other end of the spectrum it might cause you to think "wow ... is the church about to go down? I mean, finances have been really tight the past year or so. Maybe we're just having to lay a bunch of people off. I hope we make it."

So, right now, as a congregation, we have a big elephant in the room. And whenever there's an elephant in the room, you only have two options: either you ignore it or you

eat it ... one bite at a time. This morning, we're going to eat our elephant ... which means I need to talk to you about three things:

1. First, I need to talk to you about how our leadership team makes these kinds of decisions; the principles we attempt to follow when faced with these situations.
2. Second, because one of the decisions – the decision about our music ministry – has such a tangible impact on everyone, I need to talk to you about the purpose of music at NHCC; what we're trying to accomplish with it.
3. Finally, because the church is *not* falling apart – we're not in crisis, we're not engulfed in chaos, and we're not going under financially, I need to talk to you briefly about where we go from

here.

And I'll say it now and I'll say it again at the end of this message: "I've never been more confident about where we are and where we're going. I'm more positive today about our future than I have been in a long time." And I know that sounds like leader-speak: it's what you're supposed to say when all hell breaks loose and you're the one in charge. But if you've been around here long enough, you know me well enough to know that is not my style.

Now, before we dig into this elephant, I need to say something to those of you who are first-time guests with us this morning. Or, maybe you showed up last Sunday for Easter service and you were wowed by that and you wanted to come back today. Or, if you've been hanging around the church for

a while – maybe several months or maybe several years - but haven't yet made up your mind about Christ or about this church, I need to let you know that what you're about to hear is "family business." This is not a message you can apply to your life when you walk out the door this afternoon or tomorrow morning. Normally, that's what we do here on Sunday mornings, but there are times in the life of our church when the family issues are so big that we need to handle them in a way that the largest number of people can participate. For us, that's our Sunday morning service.

And, just so you'll know, there's a little bit of fear about how this kind of talk might affect you. I have one friend who says, "man, whenever you put on your pastor hat and talk to the congregation about family issues, I worry that all the people who haven't decided about Christ or about the church

are going to go running for the hills.”

And, I understand that feeling and I worry about it, too. But I also understand that one of our three core purposes here is to *build a family* – a family of people who love and care for each other so well that other people are drawn to be part of it. So, our goal here is not just to be a “message dispensing station” where people come in each week and experience “music and message that gets you through the week.”

Now, we do hope that happens, but our higher purpose if you’re sitting in these seats checking us out is to move you from someone who’s a *friend* of NHCC to someone who is part of our *family* and all that it means. That’s why we baptize people when they accept Christ – it’s the sign of belonging to him and to his family. That’s why we have small groups. That’s why we

have service projects like the one you heard about in the announcements. That's why we do potlucks. We're trying to build a family because that's what Jesus told us to do.

And if you're thinking about becoming part of a family, you ought to know something about that family ... *including* ... some of the family's dirty laundry; some of the stuff we'd all rather ignore – like the elephant in the room. And that's why when circumstances call for this kind of message, even though I know some of you might run for the hills, I do it anyway because I'd rather have you know it now than to be surprised later.

So, with all that said, let's get to the dirty laundry or to the elephant – whichever metaphor you prefer.

Three really big changes are in process right now at NHCC in the areas of music, Early Childhood Center and Children's Ministry. The change in Children's Ministry, as I said earlier, is the result of a person coming to a point of decision that "what I'm doing really doesn't line up with my calling." That kind of thing just happens. It's not out of the ordinary.

For instance, last December, some of you remember, we said goodbye to Austin and Alison Sunderman. Austin had been on our staff for several years, but all along he knew that his "calling" was to be a missionary. He has a "calling" to people in other countries where there isn't a church on every corner. So, last fall he made a very gusty decision and said "I love you people, but I will shrivel up and die if I stay here any longer, so I'm moving ... to *Romania*." If you're on The City and you're his friend, you can read his posts

... *from Romania*. The guy is in his sweet spot and it's a beautiful thing to see.

Back in our world, last January, our Children's Director, Michelle Muller completed her Bachelor's degree in Education. She got that degree because all along she's known that she's supposed to teach – get this – troubled teenagers. That's what I call "a calling." Recently, some things happened in her job here that, like Austin, made her realize what she'd known all along: "I'm supposed to be teaching ... not serving as Children's Minister in a church."

Now, when she told me that, I have to admit that I was surprised because Michelle is a hard-worker and good things keep happening in Adventureland. But then I remembered: Michelle took that position because the person who was doing that job – Julie Smoldt – had taken the position of

ECC Director 18 months ago. Michelle was Julie's assistant at the time and, as a "good soldier" she stepped into the void when Julie went across the hall and has been doing the job ever since. But leading a children's ministry is not what she's called to do long term and so she's decided it's time to move on.

The good news is that, with the Early Childhood Center closing, the person who *used to be* our Children's Ministry Director is now looking for a job. Well, not anymore since we offered her the position and she accepted. So, after the ECC closes, Julie will come back across the hall and lead our Children's Ministry again. And we're very excited about that because Julie has a calling for ministry to children and their parents. And that *calling* works equally well whether the job is Director of Early Childhood Center or Director of Children's

Ministry in a church.

By the way, since I'm talking about "calling" ... I probably should go ahead and clear up something I said last week which made at least a few people scratch their heads. We were talking about what a calling is, in the Christian sense of the word and I said that "a calling is something you just have to do for God's Kingdom or you will shrivel up and die." It could be raising godly children; it could be making lots of money so that you can support your church in a big way, or you can help people like Austin who go to romania. You've just got to do that or you'll die. It could be creating something that honors God by making the world a better place – like teaching teenagers so they can grow up to be productive adults;

And a calling may or may not be what you do in your job. If you can align your calling

and your job then so much the better. But it's not necessary.

Anyway, at one point, I made the comment that I had been giving a lot of thought lately to *my own calling* and that I had come to realize that it's *not* preaching. And some people took that as, "Oh, no - He's going to leave the church." That's not what I meant at all - I'm sorry. Don't misunderstand what I'm saying - I like preaching. I love what I'm doing right now. But I would not shrivel up and die if I couldn't do it anymore.

What I *would* shrivel up and die if I couldn't do it anymore ... is *leading*; helping a group of people see and understand *where they are* and *where they could be* and then challenging, encouraging, organizing, motivating or whatever it takes to get them to actually *move* from where they are to where they could be. I think that's what God put me

on this earth to do in one way or another. I've done it as a volunteer years ago. I did it as a youth pastor as well, and now I'm doing it as a senior pastor. If I didn't have a job in vocational ministry, I'd probably be doing it again in a volunteer capacity in a church. I'd probably be doing it in a leadership job for some company somewhere, even if I was a custodian. At some point, I'd figure out how to become the head custodian and lead the other custodians. It's my calling.

As for preaching ... to me, that's just one more tool – a really powerful tool – in the leadership toolbox. Preaching, to me, is ultimately about getting people to connect with God and with one another so we can all go somewhere together. So, if your life changes because of what God does in you through anything I say from this little platform, I'm thrilled. But I'm *more* thrilled if you are motivated by what we do here – how

God shows up through what we do every weekend – that you’re motivated enough to get into the game with us at NHCC so that other people can experience what you are experiencing so that we as a congregation can go where God is telling us to go. Preaching, for me, is a tool in the leadership toolbox.

Decision-Making Principles

Now, I tell you all of that not to put myself in the spotlight – “great, now we all know what Rick’s calling is” – but to help you understand the context of these two other decisions that we’ve just made; the changes that are taking place in the music ministry and in the ECC. The reason for these changes is different from the reason for the change in children’s ministry. That change is the result of an individual’s decision – Michelle’s decision. These other two are the

result of a leadership decision.

Now, leadership – especially leadership in the church – is one of those mysterious subjects kind of like the engine in your car: you know it's there, you know you can't go anywhere without it, but unless you're an auto mechanic, you don't have any idea how it works. So, I want to take a few minutes to clear up the mystery – at least a little bit – especially as it relates to these two big decisions we've just made.

And I want to start by making it clear that the church *is* to be led – and led well – by people who have the gift of leadership and who have been given the authority to lead. There are different ways that leadership can be implemented from church to church. There are all kinds of church polity, but, in the end, there must be people specifically appointed to that task.

As the Apostle Paul once put it to those who were responsible for leading the church at Ephesus ...

*Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.
Acts 20:28 (NIV)*

Then the Apostle Peter charged the leaders under his watchcare with almost the exact same words.

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—

Whenever the Bible speaks of shepherding a nation or a group of people it always means to lead or govern.

... not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve. 1 Peter 5:2 (NIV)

Interesting that he says that about money ... leadership in the church isn't a just a job. It's a calling.

Finally, Paul writes to Timothy, who was overseeing a whole district of churches ...

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. 1 Timothy 5:17 [NIV]

I'm not really sure what "double honor" means, and the commentators aren't either, but the point remains: individuals gifted with

the ability to lead are to direct the ministry of the church and to do that well. And it's also interesting to see preaching and teaching tied to directing the work of the church, or leadership.

Anyway ... the point is that the church *is* to be led – and led well – by people who have the gift of leadership and who have been given the authority to lead. And leading means making decisions; sometimes difficult ones that are painful for the people affected.

So, after months of prayer and deliberation, I and the associate pastors (Kitti and Ladell) with consent from our Advisory Council (seven men and women recommended *by* our congregation and selected *from* the congregation for a five-year term; a group of people to whom I am accountable for my leadership and who can fire me and hire another pastor if it ever becomes

necessary), we came to the conclusion that, for the good of NHCC, we needed to make these two moves *right now*, without further delay. And so we did.

As the pastoral leadership team, that's our job – or, at least, part of it.

And because most of the time, you all don't get to see what goes into making these kinds of decisions, I want to share with you four principles that guide our process so that you can understand and, hopefully, have confidence in the decisions that we're making. And these are things we've learned over the past 17 years of being leaders in this church, and sometimes learn the hard way.

1. “Church” is both a family and a business. Both concerns must be balanced in a healthy manner.

We are constantly, around here, evaluating the “business” bottom line in terms of things like effectiveness – are the programs or ministries that we’re doing really working? Are they making the result that we want? And we evaluate finances - all the time. But the one thing that we can never forget is that our primary business here is people ... people who we want to become part of our family and people who *are* part of our family.

And this applies to our staff members as well. When people come to work for us here at NHCC we tell them “you’re a church member before you’re a staff member” ... which means “you need to get involved and you need to get connected. You’re not here just to be a hired gun, just showing up to do a job. NHCC is to become your spiritual family, just like everyone else’s.”

Now, in practical terms, what that means is

that whenever we come to the point where the business side, the production side, isn't working well – whenever we can see that a ministry just isn't going to work out like we had hoped or that a staff member, even though they're trying really hard to do what you need them to do, just isn't going to make it – we can't just call it quits with them; we can't just let them go; we can't just throw them under the bus, the program or the person. And that occasionally frustrates some in our leadership circle (including me), but being a family means you go the extra mile with people.

For instance, if you ask the business-minded people on our Advisory Council (and we have some *amazing* people on our Council. I've gotta tell you, I can't believe these people volunteer so much time to help us with this), they will tell you that from a business viewpoint, we should have made

the decision to close the ECC as much as three, maybe even six months ago. But because it wasn't a financial drain at that point (the ECC is actually breaking even this year) and because the church is a family and a lot of people were going to be impacted, we decided we were going to go the extra mile and give it every chance to succeed. And we did ... until recently we were finally forced to accept the reality that:

1. We simply do not have the capability to do that with the excellence it deserves.
2. Trying to keep the ECC running was distracting our leadership team from the core purposes that we have as a church.

So, a week ago on Wednesday and Thursday morning, Julie Smoldt (our ECC Director), Nancy McCullough (one of our

council members who has done a lot of work on the ECC in recent months) and I delivered the news of the ECC closing in person, face-to-face to every parent who came through those doors. The response of every single one of them was "wow, what am I going to do now?" And I'm glad we got to see this because it reminded us that this is a family as well as a business.

It was the same response we got when the three of us held a meeting the Tuesday evening before with the 25 employees of the ECC and told them in person, face-to-face that we were going to close and we were sorry and that we had figured out a small way to help them financially bridge the gap between now and their next job. We let them share their grief with us; there was a lot of sadness because they love those children. And at the end of the meeting we got in a big circle and prayed over them. And we did it

that way because this is a family as much as it is a business.

As for the decision concerning Rob and our music ministry, last summer we began having conversations with him about his calling – what God has put him on this earth to do – because we were seeing some things that made us wonder if leading a music ministry in a church like NHCC (not every church; *this* church) was really where he should be long-term. And we laid those things out to him and he said, “No, I think this is my calling and I’ll work on the things you’re seeing.” And he did.

And because church is a family and a lot of people were going to be impacted if we let Rob go (you all; those who have become friends with Rob and his family; to say nothing of Rob and Corrie and their children), we decided to go the extra mile

and give him every chance to succeed even as we continued to have conversations about God's calling on his life ... until, recently, when we were finally forced to accept the reality that we believe:

1. What God has called Rob to do simply does not align well with what we need in a Director of Music.
2. In spite of all the good things Rob brings to the table (including the fact that he's an incredibly gifted musician – probably one of the greatest musicians I've ever met - and a very good man who loves God and loves his family), trying to force fit him into the position was becoming detrimental to our church as a whole.

And when I speak to the issue of the purpose

of music here at NHCC, you'll understand why I say these things.

Once we reached this decision, Kitti and I met with Rob, and I gave him the news which was, understandably, very hard for him to hear. We promised to pay him through mid-August or until he finds another position, which is a lot longer than the severances most people get in the business world. But the nature of his calling and his gifts plus the nature of "church work" means that it will likely be at least that long until he finds another position. And since this is a family as well as a business, and since Rob is a brother, and since we love him and his family, we need to bear part of that burden with him, and we do so gladly.

Let's move to the second principle we follow when we make these kinds of decisions.

2. Ultimately and eventually, we must choose “the good of the many” over “the good of the one (or the few).” Our question must always be “what is best for NHCC as a whole?”

We have to try and balance family and business but at some point we have to choose “the good of the many.”¹

By the way, that’s what God did at the cross. He chose the good of many – you and me and this whole world full of sinners – over the good of his son, Jesus. See, Jesus died for sin so that you and I and everyone else in this world doesn’t have to. The good of the many over the good of the one.

Now, I’ll be honest with you – as a leader, sometimes it’s hard to see when it’s time to implement this principle. Sometimes it’s hard to see that what you’re currently doing is choosing what’s best for the one or the few (such as a staff person or a small group of

people) to the detriment of the many.

One day last month, I was driving down the road and this weird question came to me - and as to why it came to me, it's a long story and we don't have time for it - but, this question came to me, "if tomorrow NHCC decided to hire someone else to be the senior pastor, what would he do, given that he had no connection to anything that had come before? Understanding the mission and the vision and the unique calling of NHCC as a whole, what would he do?"

And it was a very revealing question and I was surprised at how quickly I came up with a list of five or six things that a new pastor would do almost immediately, including closing the ECC, including making a change in the Music Ministry Director, because the truth is that we have been choosing the good of the one or the few over the good of the

many. Too many people in this congregation do not connect with Rob's style and the entire congregation is suffering at some level because our leadership team, our pastors, are spending a lot of energy trying to make the ECC work. And the ECC is not one of our core missions here.

Now at that point, as this revelation is going on in my head, I didn't hear a voice because God doesn't speak to me audibly (at least not yet), but I'm pretty sure this is what the Spirit said,

"So, why make them get another pastor to do what needs to be done? Why don't you stop whining and go do these things yourself, Rick?"

And that's when I went back to the council and said, "You know these things we've been talking about for months ... they need

to be done and I'm ready to do them." So we did ...

... which brings me to the third principle we try to follow.

3. Whenever we are considering these kinds of decisions, we have to respect the privacy of the individuals or groups who would be affected.

See, there are all kinds of things I and the rest of our leadership team can talk about publically before we make a decision. For instance, we can talk about the possibility of pushing this wall out and expanding our auditorium or we can even talk about the possibility of maybe there's somewhere else we could put a new building or new structure. We can go into great detail and discuss all the options with anyone who wants to.

We can talk about church finances. We can look at the books together and talk about our options if things don't improve or, if things do improve.

But what we cannot talk about publicly – or even privately for that matter – are the decisions our leadership team is contemplating that have to do with an individual or a group in the church. We can't come to you and say, "Folks, we're thinking we ought to close the ECC. We have a list of reasons why it's not working. Would you all put us on your prayer list? Ask God to give us wisdom and discernment." Or, "folks, Kitti and I have been talking with Rob about some things related to his calling and this ministry position" *We can't* do that.

It's not fair to him and his family. And it's not only unfair to the employees of the ECC to let everyone know what we're thinking about

their jobs, it's also detrimental to the families who have kids over there and it's detrimental to the business. On the one hand, we're trying to make it work; on the other hand we're saying "y'all pray because we're afraid it might not" ... when that gets out - *and it will get out* – then we're done whether we want to be or not.

Now, the unfortunate by-product of this principle is that a decision which has been discussed and debated and prayed over for months, when it happens, looks like a sudden knee-jerk reaction. It makes some people think, "Oh my gosh, the church is falling apart" or "those pastors have no idea what the heck is going on up there. They have no idea what they're doing." It makes other people think that we're hiding something: "So, why didn't we know there was a problem? We're supposed to be a family around here, aren't we?"

But that's the price we have to pay. Actually, it's the price we *choose* to pay in order to respect the privacy of the individuals and groups who might be affected.

And it makes sense too, because, in a family, in your family and in mine, there are certain burdens that the leaders of the family – the parents – bear that everyone else – the children – do not bear. Back in 1994 when my wife, Jetta, went through a nervous breakdown, my kids (three girls) were under the age of eight and they knew something was going on, but we didn't bring them into the gory details, "Now, kids, mom has to take this medicine and she has to go see this person and we're hoping it's going to be okay, but, gosh, maybe she's demon-possessed..." We didn't go to that level with our kids. We didn't tell our kids every single detail about that. Years later though, when

they became young women and they began to experience some of the same symptoms in their own lives, we sat down with them and said, "let me tell you what happened to your mom. And here's what she did." It's not their burden to bear at that point.

In the same way, it's not the congregation's responsibility to bear the burden of every decision. That belongs to the pastors and to the Advisory Council.

Ok, one more principle that I think I need to explain very briefly, because this one is kind of confusing.

4. When making several big changes, we have come to believe it's best to do them all at once.

Several weeks ago, when we knew we had three big changes that were going to take place and all of them were going to catch a

bunch of people by surprise, we thought about stringing them out so as not to overwhelm everyone or make people think the sky is falling when it really isn't.

But our experience has taught us that the best strategy is to just spill all the beans at once; let everybody deal with whatever emotion comes as a result; help people understand what is going on and then move on to whatever is next. And that is why we've done it this way.

Now, there are other principles that guide us in this, but these are the ones we kept coming back to over the past several months. And, if NHCC is your church, I hope it helps you to understand how we approach these things. And I hope that it inspires a little bit of confidence in you.

If you have questions about any of this, please send me an email or come talk to me. I'll be happy to discuss this further, as much of it as I can, with anyone who has a question. Don't, however, put an anonymous comment on a card in the offering box. We throw those away because this is a family and in a family we don't do anonymous comments. (And if Jetta tries, it doesn't work because I know her handwriting!) That's how it works here.

About Music

Now, I want to shift gears and talk about the purpose of music at NHCC; specifically, what we're trying to accomplish with it.

And I think this is necessary because Rob's style and persona was very different than anything we've ever had at NHCC ... which

we knew and felt good about when we asked him to join our staff two-and-a-half years ago ... and, quite frankly, I *still* feel good about. See, at that point, our pastoral leadership team felt that, as a congregation, we needed a person like Rob to stretch us ... *because music in a church isn't all about us and what we like and what suits our personal taste.*

So let me tell you what music *is* about at NHCC; four purposes we have always had since our beginning 17 years ago and that are going to carry forth no matter who comes to lead us in the future. These four are ordered from the most obvious to the least obvious – *not* from the most important to the least important because all of these are equally important. And whoever leads our music ministry in the future (as well as those who serve in the music ministry as volunteers) needs to embrace all four of these things.

1. One purpose – the most obvious – is to lead people to engage in worship.

I say it's most obvious because the Bible is full of exhortations to worship God thru music. As the Apostle Paul put it:

Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. Colossians 3:16 (NLT)

Now, because of that – because we're to worship God through music – a lot of musicians and music leaders in churches think their task is to lead worship. But that's wrong. Their task – at least as it concerns this first purpose – is to lead *people* ... into worship.

This became clear to me in a very personal way several years ago. After what I thought

was one of my most brilliant messages here on a Sunday morning, my youngest daughter Janelle said, "Daddy, have you ever thought about teaching at a Bible college or a seminary?" Now, she meant that as a compliment. And it first, that's how I took it.

But then, it hit me, "Oh, my gosh! I'm *not* teaching at a Bible college or a seminary. And if what's coming out of my mouth is more appropriate for that crowd than for this crowd, then Houston, we have a problem."

And at that moment, I felt the Spirit say to me, "Rick, you're not here to teach the Bible or theology or principles of the Christian life. You're here to teach *people* ... the Bible and theology and principles of the Christian life. You are here to engage *them* and lead *them* so that they learn those things. If you're not putting the cookies on the lowest shelf,

where people can get them, then this is not where you need to be. And your daughter is right, you need to be in a seminary or a Bible college.”

It was a huge wakeup call for me. But I also realized that the same principle is true in almost every area of ministry, especially worship music. The job is not to lead worship; the job is to lead *people* to engage in worship. And to do that, you have to put the cookies on the lowest shelf. Worship music needs to be singable by the average person and the words need to be straightforward and not so poetic that you're scratching your head trying to figure out what the heck we just sang.

Unfortunately, that's not Rob's calling and giftedness. Rob is a creative genius. He really is. He is so creative that he has a hard time doing something the same way twice ...

which means it's difficult for a lot of people to engage in worship. And even though he tried valiantly to fit that mold for us, eventually we had to conclude that this is who God made Rob to be. And God can better use him in some other setting where this kind of action and reaction is not such a priority.

First purpose of music – the most obvious but not the most important – is to lead people to engage in worship.

2. Another purpose is to enhance the message by preparing people to hear or re-emphasizing what people have heard.

We want to use something that people can easily relate to – music – to engage them in what we're going to talk about. This is why we often try to package a song with a drama before I or someone else speaks. And it's why we almost always close with a song that

goes along with the message. It artistically and emotionally restates what we've been talking about so that it comes home to us in a different way.

And, if you've checked out other churches here in the Northland, I think you know that this is part of what makes NHCC unique. There are only one or two churches that I can think of that do this kind of thing on a regular basis. And we do not plan to change this just because of a leadership change. This is part of our DNA so to speak and it will remain that way in the future. And using music in this way is as important to us as using it to lead people to engage in worship.

Now, there's a tradeoff we have to make because of this purpose and I'm sure some of you have realized it. *Because we use music in this way (sometimes two songs this way), it cuts down on the time we have*

available to use music to engage people in worship. But we're comfortable with that tradeoff because of our next purpose, which is to ...

3. Culturally connect with “seekers” – people who are not yet believers, but who come into our church, come to our services, curious about the faith, curious about Christ and curious about the church.

This is why, as often as we can, we use secular music for the second purpose of enhancing the message.

And, quite frankly, it works because this is a story I hear over and over: when a person who hasn't been in a church for a while comes to NHCC, most of them enjoy the worship music even if they can't engage in worship by singing along. (They don't really expect to and, in most cases, aren't ready to).

But when they hear our band do a song by Kenny Chesney or Aqualung or Nickel Creek or John Mayer, Johnny Paycheck, Johnny Cash, Alanis Morissette, The Beatles, MuteMath, Billy Joel, or Martina McBride (all people that we've done in the last year) ... they're *shocked* ... especially when we do it well. "Wow, I can't believe they just did that in church! Maybe church ... maybe Jesus ... has some relevance to the real world in which I live."

And when that happens in a person, we're doing what the Apostle Paul did. The Bible tells us that as he entered the very pagan city of Athens he took note of their culture and saw how he could use that culture to point people to Christ.

He says,

"Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in

every way, for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: 'To an Unknown God.' This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I'm telling you about." Acts 17:22-23 (NLT)

"This statue that you're familiar with - it points to Christ. Let me explain how."

"This song you're familiar with - it points to Christ. Let me show you how."

And this is why we're comfortable with not singing for 25-30 minutes and why we never will be, in our Sunday morning services, musically speaking, like Vineyard or some of the other incredible churches in the Northland where you can sing for 30 minutes every weekend non-stop if that's what you

want.

And if that is where your heart is with respect to music and worship; if you will shrivel up and die if you cannot do that on a regular basis then, then for your own spiritual health and well-being, go to one of those churches instead. Or, if you're going to stay here at NHCC because you love the mission and the vision, then turn on K-LOVE every morning and sing your heart out for half-an-hour. Go get a Chris Tomlin CD, put it in and have your own worship concert.

And, please hear my heart on this, I'm saying this with passion but I mean this in the most gentle and gracious way... because we have decided that, at NHCC, our music isn't all about us and what we want music and worship to be. It's about culturally connecting with seekers as well.

But here's the deal. Because of this purpose, our music team and music leadership must go the extra-mile to make the congregational music even more accessible. Since we're only going to sing two or three songs together at the most, those songs have to be dead on; they have to be easily accessible. And they haven't been. And that's going to change.

So, three purposes so far ... to lead people to engage in worship, to enhance the message and to culturally connect with seekers – all equally important but maybe not equally obvious.

4. A final purpose is to use the task of making music to get the people making the music “done.”

That's a little bit wordy but it's exactly what we mean.

When a person gets in the game with us and becomes part of our music team, their involvement in producing what happens for the rest of us each weekend ought to grow and develop *them*, not just us, *them*, as followers of Jesus. See, we use doing the work to get the people doing the work “done” in Christ. We try to do that all through our ministry.

But that doesn't happen automatically, because we humans naturally tend to focus on “doing” instead of “being;” we focus on the task instead of the heart. That's why, in our staff configuration, it's the job of the Music Director to shepherd people in that way ... which means that it takes a person with a leadership gift and a shepherd's heart.

And as talented and gifted and willing as Rob was – and is – that's not him. He doesn't

have the gift at that level that we need. And, as pastors, we had to make the call that the health and development of our team – our whole team; “the many” – was more important than “the one.”

What's Next

Well, I've said a lot this morning but I feel like this is a defining moment for us as a church and so I *needed* to say a lot. Let me briefly talk about what's next, especially in the music area.

- Next week, these guys are going to come back from HLG.
- In two weeks we're going to have our own band back up and we're going to continue the same kind of music program and style we've done.
- We'll begin looking for a full-time person who will hopefully lead not just

our music ministry but our entire arts ministry.

- We may hire a person to lead during the interim, but we're going to rely heavily on people already in our music ministry ... *and* ... on people in this congregation who are musically gifted but have been sitting on the sidelines. Some of you have the ability to do – with excellence – what we try to do every week, but you're not available. You're too busy; you've got too many other things going on in your life. Listen, I'm going to tell you – we need you. We need you to get in the game, especially if you play lead guitar or keyboard or have ever led a band. And I know some of you have done it – you're hiding. You need to come talk to me or Kitti ASAP and get in the game with us.

Now, the other thing I want to say about "what's next" is that over the next three weeks, we're going to have a Membership Challenge around here. In fact, that's the title of the next series, for three weeks, it's called: The Membership Challenge.

Last fall, God kind of spoke to us (again, not audibly), but we felt like the Spirit was saying to us as leaders, "Next year, 2011, is going to be a Core Group year." And, by "core group," we mean like when we first started this church, we gathered a core group of people together and said, "Who is really in on this mission and vision of NHCC? We need to know - who is in our core group going forward?" And don't hear what I'm not saying, if you're thinking "okay, so you're going to find out who's in. Well, I'm not sure if I'm in, so that means I can't come back to church anymore." That is not what I'm saying. What we're saying is we need to

know who is in. And, I knew that, at some point, we would come to a defining moment but I didn't know how we would get there. But, we're here.

I think it's time to find out who's in on our mission because God has great things ahead for us and I have never more confident of that than I am right now. We are more focused and less distracted than we have been in years on what God is calling us to be and do as a church. But to go forward we need to know who is in, who we can count on to help us accomplish our mission.

And the way we say that we're "in" here at NHCC is through membership. So, over the next three weekends, I'm going to teach the basic content of our Church 101 course (which is the two-hour course you have to go to if you want to be a member). We're going to do everything else we normally do in a

service next week – we’ll have music, drama, etc – it’s going to be like a regular service, but the content of the message will be based from that course.

And, here’s the deal:

- Come to each service (or watch the video of the message online if you can’t make it)
- Watch a short and incredibly entertaining video each week which covers the material that doesn’t really fit a Sunday morning message.
- Then fill out the membership application that expresses your commitment to Christ and to this church ...

... and you can be a member. And I know that there are some of you here who are thinking “I think I’m already a member. But I

don't know if I'm a patron or a partner (because we used to have a two-level membership system). I don't know what I am."

Well, guess what? We don't know what you are either. And at this point it doesn't really matter. So, this is your chance to nail this down if you've been wondering "am I a member or not." This is it. This is your chance to nail it down, and, I hope you will – over the next three weeks.

OK, thanks for listening to me rattle on this morning. Let's stand together and sing a song we're all familiar with as our closing prayer.

Endnotes

ⁱ John 11:50, Romans 5:19