

# *Looking Ahead*

**August 21/22, 2010**

Good morning everyone.

Well, it's that time of year. Kids are back in school, the weather is getting a little more reasonable, football season is just around the corner ... which means that summer is almost over. I don't know about you, but I have had a *great* summer.

**Our two youngest daughters, Katie and Janelle, lived at home.**

Besides just getting to hang out with them, they cooked and cleaned and kept the yard up for us.

**In June, I got to go to DC for a couple days just to watch baseball with my Dad.**

The Royals played the Nationals – they lost both games. Shock.

**In July, Janelle got engaged to Ben.**

They're getting married January 1st.

**We had a great vacation in Ocean City, MD  
with my extended family.**

As you can see, Ben came with us, too. He had to pass the family test, and he did.

**And I got to play a lot of golf before it got  
blistering hot.**

It's been a really good summer for me.

But the best thing I did and experienced this summer wasn't the kids living at home – nice as that was. It wasn't Janelle getting engaged – though I have to tell you I am thrilled from a financial point of view. (I'm also happy for her, too.) It wasn't even the fact that my golf game is better than ever and I've finally broken 80.

And it wasn't the week in Ocean City which was, by far, *the best time* I've had with my sisters and my parents in years. Everyone actually got along the entire week!

**Maybe it was because Ben was there. I don't know.**

But it was something *completely different* from what we've experienced before.

Now, where was I? Oh, I was going to tell you about the best thing I did this summer. It wasn't anything I mentioned earlier. The best thing I did this summer was spending a week at a retreat for pastors and spouses called SonScape.

**SonScape is located up in the mountains**

...

... about 30 minutes west of Colorado Springs on the backside of Pike's Peak in the booming metropolis of Divide, Colorado – elevation 9,100 feet.

**Jetta and I spent seven days there with three other pastors and their wives who came to be refreshed and encouraged, a host couple who cooked all of the meals and did all of the cleaning, the couple who actually led the retreat.**

We had no TV, no internet and cell phone service was spotty. I've been on retreats before, but never anything quite like SonScape. It was, literally, a seven-day time out from life.

And it was very good. But not just because of the people and the place. It was good because God said some things to me about *me*. I had some "ahas" that I think are going to be life-changing for me. Not in an over-the-top dramatic kind of way – just some thoughts, concepts and habits that, over time, are going to make a difference in who I am and how I deal with life – in fact, they're already making a difference for me.

So, this morning I want to tell you two of the things God said to me but, first, I have to tell you how I got to the point where I was ready to hear what God had to say. In our first session, Bob, the guy who was leading the retreat went around the room and asked everyone why they came to SonScape.

- The first pastor said he had been fired about a year ago from his church and was trying to get over that experience and decide if he should go back into vocational ministry.
- The second guy said that he had been struggling with depression off and on and was hoping to find some peace and resolution to whatever it was that was bugging him.
- The third guy was two years into starting a brand new church and was overwhelmed by it and just needed to remember why – and for Whom – he was doing it.

When it got to me, I said, “I really don’t have a reason other than the fact that some nice people in my church thought it would be a good idea for Jetta and I to have this experience, and so they took up a collection and we didn’t even know they were doing it but they came to us one day and said, “Hey, here is this really cool thing and we would love for you to go.” So, I feel kind of bad about being here because, apparently, I have life a lot easier than some of you guys.”

“But there is one thing that gets to me from time to time,” I said. “When you start a church and you’re the pastor for 16+ years, you get to see a lot of people leave. It’s hard to build relationships with people because you never know when they’re going to get mad or get bored or get transferred or just fall away from the faith. But, eventually, over 16 years, you see a lot of people leave.”

And, for some reason, as I was saying that, I got a lump in my throat and tears welled up and before I knew it, I was weeping. And Jetta was looking at me like, “woah – who is *this* guy???”

The next day, the two of us got to meet one on one with Bob and his wife, Jeanne, and in the course of our discussion, Bob said to me, “I’ve seen a lot of guys like you who’ve started a church. The longer they stay with it, the more it becomes their baby. They get tied to it. And it becomes who they are. So when bad things happen – like people leaving (even for good reasons), it feels personal. It makes you feel like a failure.”

And as Bob was talking a little “mental picture” came to me.

**I have been living as if I am somehow tied to the mast of the good ship North Heartland.**

Whenever it, North Heartland, goes up, I go up. And whenever North Heartland goes down, I go down.

Out of that image and discussion with Bob, God told me two things which I wrote down in my journal that I want to share with you this morning. And I've been trying to keep these two thoughts in my head as much as I can almost every day:

**The first one is that “I am NOT my job.”**

I am not my job. For some of you, it was worth the drive to church this morning just to hear that, because that's where you are. You need to start thinking that too. I am *not* “tied to the mast of the good ship North Heartland.” Successes or failures in my job do not define who I am.

I'll say a little more about that next week when we begin a two-week series called “Take This Job And ...” well, you know.



But the second thing that God told me ... and this is where you all come in ...

**... is that ...**

The experience of “church” is something we ALL create together. As a pastor, I am responsible for shepherding and overseeing the people and process, but the “success” (or failure) of the people or the process is not ME, nor is it ultimately my responsibility.

I’m supposed to work hard and do my best at what God has called me to do, but it’s not all up to me. It’s up to all of us.

And, just so you’ll know, this isn’t some new truth that God revealed to me because I got high enough in altitude. It’s actually in the Bible. I had just lost sight of it.

For instance, the Apostle Peter wrote:

*To the elders (another way to say pastors) among you, I appeal as a fellow elder:*

*Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing ...*  
*1 Peter 5:1-2 (NIV)*

And, that's my job, to be a shepherd, an overseer.

Paul wrote:

*Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers.*

And, I'm one of those "gifts."

**And my job ... my responsibility is,**

**according to Paul ...**

*... is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ ...  
Ephesians 4:11-12 (NIV)*

*Then we will no longer be immature like children ...  
Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church.*

*He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love. Ephesians  
4:14-16 (NIV)*

As each part – the people who are pastors and the people who are *not* pastors – as each part does (or *doesn't* do) its own special work, the “experience of church” – whatever that

turns out to be – is created. Pastors are to shepherd and oversee it, but everyone who is part of the church is to be a player in that at some level.

## **The “Experience of Church”**

Now, I’m telling you this this morning not to complain about my job and not to say “maybe I need to end this thing” or anything like that. I love my job, I love this church, I love you people. I can’t imagine doing anything else.

The reason I’m sharing what I’ve learned (actually, re-learned) about myself and my role is to ask the question: “what kind of church experience can pastors and not-pastors create together?” What kind of experience can we all create together?

By the way, just to be clear, when I say “experience of church” I mean a lot more than what happens in an hour on Sunday (or

Saturday night). The “experience of church” also has to do with the kind of connection and community we have with one another *beyond that hour* and then the resultant impact of all those connections and community on the people around us – the people with whom we do life every day.

And that experience can be good or not-so-good. It can be deep or shallow. It can be weak or strong. It can be supportive or neglectful. It can be lots of things. In fact, the NT gives many examples of what church experience could be.

For instance, the first part of the book of Revelation contains several brief letters that the Spirit of Christ directed the Apostle John to write to some of the key churches in the first century-world. One of those letters was written to the church in Sardis, and part of what it said was:

*“I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up!”*  
*Revelation 3:1 (NIV)*

And a church could be like that: having a reputation of “being something” but then, resting on that reputation and not really living up to it.

Another letter was written to the church at Laodicea, and it said:

*“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”*  
*Revelation 3:1-2 (NIV)*

A church can be like that, too, where pastors and not-pastors care about Christ and the church – just not a whole lot. The church exists – people show up and participate when

it's convenient – but it doesn't really have much impact because there are too many other things in life competing for everyone's attention.

And, then in the scripture, there were the churches of Macedonia. At some point in the first century, apparently there was a famine that affected the city of Jerusalem so the Apostle Paul went to all the churches he had started, collecting money for a relief effort at the church in Jerusalem. Here's what he wrote about the churches of Macedonia and what they did in response to his request for help.

*They are being tested by many troubles, and they are very poor. But they are also filled with abundant joy, which has overflowed in rich generosity.*

*For I can testify that they gave not only what they could*

*afford, but far more. And they did it of their own free will. They begged us again and again for the privilege of sharing in the gift for the believers in Jerusalem.*

1 Corinthians 8:1-4  
(NLT)

Pastors and not-pastors can create *that* kind of church experience – one where financial generosity overflows in providing for the needs of those followers of Christ who are in financial distress.

And, of course, in Acts chapter two, there's the quintessential passage that defines the epitome of what a church experience can be like.

*All the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need.*



*They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity— all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people.*

*And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.  
Acts 2:42-47 (NLT)*

Anyway, those are some examples of “experience of church” created by *everyone* who was a part of those churches.

## **Our Vision**

So, I guess the next question would be “what kind of experience are we – you and me together – creating?” Are we like the church that had a reputation but wasn't living up to it? Are we lukewarm? Are we overflowing

with generosity to those among us and around us who are in distress? Are we devoted to worship and learning together, to creating relationships with at least a few other believers here?

From my point of view, as the shepherd and overseer of this flock, I think all of those things are true of this church at some level: there is great generosity happening in portions of this congregation, relationships are being built in many places within this congregation, there is learning going on, there are people worshipping here, there is lukewarmness (if there is such a word) in this congregation – all of those things are happening here.

But a more important question than “what are we creating?” might be “What are we *supposed* to be creating?” What has God put our congregation here for in this place at this time?

If you were part of NHCC last fall, you may remember that our leadership team became convicted that we had lost sight of the answer to that question; that we'd become a church with a reputation for a certain kind of experience, but that we were not living up to that reputation.

When I spoke about it to you in early December, I referred back to the initial vision that led to us planting and launching this church in 1994. And this is what I said in that message.

- It was clear then (when we started this church) that, whatever else this church might do, the one thing we collectively *must do* is to be Christ's ambassadors to the 85% of the folks in our neighborhoods who, this morning, felt like any other option was a better option than getting up and going to church

somewhere.

- It was clear back then that this church is to be in the business of “spiritual lifesaving” and that *the one thing* that absolutely must happen and has to keep on happening is that *spiritually lost and drowning people in our local community get pulled out of the water of sin and separation from God and then brought to the safety of Jesus and his people*. If that doesn’t happen, we should just close the doors of this place.

But in order to be that kind of church, I said, we also have to work on creating a radically generous family of believers who love Jesus and care for each other so well that other people, when they hear about what we’re doing, when they actually come into contact, say, “Wow! Could I be a part of that?” They’re drawn to be part of us.

That's a lot like what happened in Acts Chapter 2. It wasn't just through great sermons and great music and great programs that people came to know Christ. It was because the People of God loved *each other* ... "and God added to them daily those who were being saved."

So, when it comes down to it, what we're supposed to do at NHCC is very simple:

**To create an experience of discovery and belonging.**

1. To help our "friends" (those who are not part of this church) *discover* the grace and truth of Jesus.
2. To help our "family" (those who are members of this church) feel like they *belong*.

And feeling like you belong – the experience of belonging – we define as "knowing and being known; loving and being loved; serving

and being served; celebrating and being celebrated.”

So, at the beginning of this year we set a few goals that we thought would help us become more effective – three goals, actually.

1. Refocus weekend services to be more intentionally “friend-oriented.”

One of the things we felt God said very clearly was “Never forget that weekend services are the primary entry point for those are not yet followers of Jesus.”

2. Develop a member-support network (so that people don’t fall through the cracks).
3. Work on improving the look of our building.

I think we’ve made some progress on all three of those.

1. On “improving the look”
  - a. We’re in the process of upgrading Adventureland and the ECC areas as we speak.
  - b. We’ve done some reorganization of the commons.
  - c. The bookstore is getting a new name and a new look.
  - d. And one of these days, hopefully sooner than later, I think we’re going to push this west wall out about 30 feet and turn this room sideways and redo it nice, so it will hold about twice as many people.
  
2. As to the member-support network, we’re still in the pilot phase. We’ve started with a small group of people who have become members in just the past several months and we plan to increase its scope this fall.

3. As to the weekend services, other than today, I think the topics we've chosen this year are some of the most accessible we've ever done for those who are not "church-people."

So, I think we've made some progress on our goals. I think we've gained a much sharper focus.

But really, those are just *goals* and, quite frankly, primarily *goals for the pastors*. What's most important is the overall experience of church that *all of us together* are supposed to create.

### **An experience of discovery and belonging ...**

1. To help our "friends" (those who are not part of this church) discover the grace and truth of Jesus.
2. To help our "family" (those who are members of this church) feel like they belong.



## What It Will Take

So, the question is ... for NHCC to move forward in creating that kind of experience, what will it take from *all of us – everyone who says, “That’s my church”?*

I wish I had something to say in response that is new and exciting and really *visionary*. But I don’t. Actually (and this is hard to say because of the way I’m wired up personality-wise), I’m about 95% convinced that *vision is overrated*.

A couple of weeks ago, some pastor friends of mine were all excited about some big name ministry-leader-guru who is coming to town to do a conference over at PVBC and they wanted to know if I was planning to go. I said “no” which I think shocked them. I said “No, because I’ve about had it up to here with vision. What our church needs is more

execution; more doing of what we already know to do.”

And that’s really what it will take to move forward in creating the “experience of church” that God has called us to create. We need people who will simply do *what they already know to do*.

But let me be clear about that. We don’t need people do what they know to do out of duty or obligation. We’re not trying to create a bunch of “elder brother Christians” (and if you were here two weeks ago, you know what I’m talking about. If you weren’t here you can get the DVD or listen online). We need people to do what they already know to do out of a desire to see the church be what church can be when it’s reaching its potential *and* out of a desire to experience what it’s like to be part of *creating it*.

And that’s what I want you to experience – all

of you. I don't want you to experience a lukewarm church or a church that's resting on but not living up to a reputation. I want you to have the joy of being in a committed, generous and effective church that does what God put it here to do.

So, what things do we already know to do?

As I thought about how to explain this, my mind drifted back to the very first people (the "not-pastors" kind of people) who signed on to be part of the core group that planted this church. I thought about what we asked of those people and I decided I'd just throw it out to you, let you take a look and let you think about this.

In the nine months before we had our first service, whenever we would talk to someone about joining up with us and helping us launch this church, we gave them a form explaining what we were doing and the

commitment it would take.

**Across the top of the page it read:**

We are building a “high-impact church designed to draw unchurched individuals and families into a meaningful relationship with Christ and his church.”

And then it said:

A high-impact church requires high-impact people. We are not looking for people who *like our ideas* – we need people who will make it work by investing their “time, talents and treasures.” And we need to know who we can count on. That's why we ask people to express in writing their commitment to this venture. Thanks for considering whether God is calling you to join us!

And then the commitment part of the page

said this:

Believing that God has called me to support the launching of North Heartland Community Church, I commit to ...

1. Continue growing in my personal relationship with Jesus Christ. (If I'm not growing then I can't be giving. If God is not giving me something, I have nothing to give back. I'm going to stay connected with Jesus so that I have something to offer to what you're trying to do here as a group.)
2. Live a "seeker-targeted lifestyle." (There are people out there seeking God. They are not church people – they may not look like or talk like church people but they're looking for something. So, as part of this operation, we're going to keep our eyes open for people like that; we're going to make friends with people like that; we're not going to think of

them as enemies because they don't sing the songs we sing. They are the people Jesus loves.)

3. Participate in the life of the church twice a week, as follows:
  - a. Attend the weekend service
  - b. Attend a Friendship Group (first three weeks of the month) and the praise and worship service (fourth week)
    - We call them small groups, now and you can sign up.
4. Serve faithfully in a ministry of the church. Get involved in doing *something* because it takes all of us to do what we're supposed to do.

Note: In the early days it was kind of easy because there were only 40 or 50 of us and a lot of us were doing 2 or 3 things volunteer wise,

but when the church gets bigger, it's harder to figure out where to get involved because it looks like everything is working great – “they don't really need any help around here. I can just show up and go away and they'll be fine.” And, that's not true. And, that's why this morning we have these tables set up in the commons. We're having our semi-annual Ministry fair. We set it up every 6 months so that you can stop by one of those tables on the way out – ask one of the people at the table what the ministry is about and what needs we have and maybe that's something you can be involved in.

5. Tithe regularly to support the ministry of the church. (We got serious about money.)

If God continues to prosper me as  
He has, I will contribute an annual  
amount \_\_\_\_\_ of  
\$ \_\_\_\_\_

There was one more commitment:

6. Appreciate contemporary country  
music.

Because back in those days contemporary country music was really big in Kansas City at that time, the #1 format. So, we said we would use that to connect with people who are not part of our family yet, who do not listen to Christian radio, who do not listen to K-LOVE, who wouldn't know a praise & worship song if it slapped them in the face, but they do know contemporary country music. And, if you're going to be part of us you've got to understand that that is what we're going to do and that's why we're going to do it, and if you don't like it, you need to



see if God is telling you to be involved somewhere else. This is as important today as it was back then. Not because we do a lot of country, but we still do a lot of secular stuff to bridge the gap between where people are and where Jesus is ... like the LOST: More Than Must See TV series we did in June. Joining the core group meant saying “you know, I’ve never seen an episode of LOST but because it connects with so many people who would never expect a church to talk about a stupid TV show ... I’m there. I’m supporting it. Because that’s what our church is called to do and that’s what it takes.”

You see, when people joined up in the beginning, we asked them to sign the paper and make a two year commitment to the process. And you know what - *people did*. People signed and people committed, and that’s a big reason why we are even here today.

## Conclusion

Now, I'm not going to ask you to sign anything today. You get to do *that* if you go to the "Introduction to NHCC" class and you decide to become a member. In fact, a lot of you probably *should* go to the class (even some who are members from way back – it might be helpful to you to do it again just to be reminded of what it means to be a member of the church).

But signing something today isn't the goal. The goal today is to simply remind everyone ...

1. That we're all in this together– all of us who say "NHCC is my church" - we're responsible for what we create.
2. That everything we need to be the church we're supposed to be is right here in this room (or will have been

throughout all three services this weekend) because God has already gifted us to do what it is he's put here to do. We've got all the money we need to do our ministry in this room (from all three services). We've got all the volunteers we need, already sitting here. We've got all the talents and skills we need, right here, to do what we're supposed to do.

And then the goal today is to ask “who wants to be a part of the next phase in the life of NHCC? Who wants to be part of the foundation of the future, just like the original core group members were the foundation of the past? Do you? Will you become a “contributor to the experience?” Or will you settle for being a “consumer of religious services?”

By the way, there's nothing wrong with being a consumer. If there aren't consumers, there's

no need to create anything! And sometimes that's just where life has you. You can't contribute. Or, this is a new experience and this is not your church. But if people *remain* "just a consumer" – if they don't become contributors at some point, eventually there will be nothing produced to consume.

Now, I'm going to ask the band to come and get into place for our closing song. And I want to ask you to think about those things on the Core Group list. Where are you with those kinds of things? And are you where you should be? You might be. You look at that list and maybe God is saying, "You're doing what I've asked you to do at this point in your life. Relax."

Or you might not be. Maybe God is saying, "I want you to change some things in your life, because I've told you that you're a part of this church and you are partly responsible for the experience we create. And I will give you the

power and the strength to do so. Start giving. Sign up for a small group. Visit the tables on the way out instead of running for your kids or the car. (AL knows what we're doing – they'll hold the kids until 10:35/12:05)."

Whatever God is telling us ... let's say "yes" this morning OK? Because the result will be something awesome not just for the church, but for us as well. It's what God wants us to do. It's where God wants us to be. It's how God wants to bless us, individually and as a body.

Let's pray.