

The First 20 Years

June 22, 2014

Worship Songs – Mighty to Save/Immortal, Invisible/Great God Who Saves

**Turn and Greet/Intro Video
Welcome/Announce/Fireworks Video**

Feature – Wake Me Up

Did you catch those words?

“Feeling my way through the darkness guided by a beating heart.
I can’t tell where the journey will end but I know where to start.
Wake me up when it’s all over, when I’m wiser and I’m older.
All this time I was finding myself and I didn’t know I was lost.”

We’re going to come back to those words in just a few minutes. But first, will you pray with me?

Prayer

Thanks for opportunity to be part of this amazing idea You have called the New Testament church. Thanks that You’re not only in the process of saving our eternities, but You’re also making our “right-nows” an amazing journey with You.

Open our hearts to what You want to teach us.

Good morning! It’s great to be here today! I gotta tell you – there’s no place like home ☺

You might be wondering what I did for 6 long weeks without NHCC! Well, I spent a week on Table Rock Lake with my husband in a nice quiet cabin. We ate at local dives, watched movies, slept late and lived without cable or internet. It was wonderful!

I also spent time with our kids and grandkids and enjoyed the view from my deck at the Farmlet.

Besides getting to spend special time with Mark and our family, I got to reflect on being on staff at NHCC for 20 years. Rick invited me to be his first director of children's ministries just a couple of months before our first public service.

Remember the Avicii song the band just did?

“Feeling my way through the darkness
Guided by a beating heart.
I can't tell where the journey will end
But I know where to start.
Wake me up when it's all over,
When I'm wiser and I'm older.
All this time I was finding myself
And I didn't know I was lost.”

That was me. Nothing but raw passion and no clue what I was in for. I knew I wanted to be part of something that was bigger than me. The Bible even has a passage that was foundational in how that could look. In Acts 2 we read:

*The believers lived in harmony, holding everything in common.
They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that
each person's needs were met.*

*They followed a discipline of worship in the Temple followed by
meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as
they praised God.*

*People liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God
added those who were saved.*

(Acts 2:43-47 The Message)

That's why I came to NHCC and that's why I've stayed. Because I am passionate about being part of that kind of church. I wish I could tell you I learned lots of wonderful lessons and it was all sweetness and light. But in the words of my friend Darrin Patrick, who pastors this rather large church called The Journey in St Louis,

Vocational ministry is the best job I'll ever hate.....and the worst job I'll ever love.

I've definitely learned a lot in the past 20 years. Some days I've hated what I do, but most days I've loved it. And I can't seem to quit no matter how much I feel like I've made a mess of things.

So here's the best summary I can give you of my sabbatical learnings. If you know me, you know I'm a bit random so I apologize in advance to those of you who like outlines. There isn't one for this message. It's more a stream of consciousness, which

is why I'm calling it "The First 20 Years" or Kitti's 2014 Sabbatical Random Reflections.

1. Take risks.

Jesus trusted spreading the Gospel to a bunch of fishermen, some tax collectors and businessmen. The best we can tell, not one teacher or preacher or rabbi. Oh, and one of this motley crew ended up betraying Him. Not a great start for a plan that would change the world. But it worked. God loves to surprise us with what He can do --- if we just say "OK, I'll try it...."

When I came to NHCC, I had a lot of experience as a volunteer, but I didn't go to seminary. I wasn't "trained" to be on a church staff. I wasn't even a very patient volunteer leader! And I came from a church

where women didn't even pray publicly. Would you hire someone with those qualifications to oversee your children's ministry?

But Rick took a risk in inviting me to be part of his staff. And I took a risk and said "Yes." And then I tried to quit every week for about five years because I was so terrified of failing.

But week after week I kept trying. And learning. And taking risks. I learned when risks were foolish. And I also learned just how much I depended on "me" to get things done instead of trusting God to be in control.

And I'm still doing that 20 years later. Except I don't try to quit every week because I've learned we are all works in progress – and no one has all the answers!

2. Just because you think something doesn't mean you have to say it. Sometimes the best thing you can say is nothing at all.

I will never forget the fall of 1994 when we were fresh into our "set-up/tear-down" church.

Let me describe what that means. Every single thing it took to do ministry had to be hauled in on Sunday morning, set up and then dismantled, packed and hauled back out. Every single week. The same was true for our band and all the technical equipment.

And our coffee corner. Take a moment and imagine just how many Rubbermaid tubs that would be.

The tubs were marked by location and normally we were pretty organized. But one particular Sunday, our children's ministry tubs were a disaster. Baby blankets in the elementary gym; preschool books and puzzles in the infant room.... It was a mess. And the only way to fix it is to physically move all the tubs to the right place and pray the

volunteers had time to set up. But I was also short volunteers. And in about 30 minutes 50 children were going to show up and we were supposed to be offering an excellent children's program. So maybe I should quit my job because certainly someone else could do this better. And of course it *was all up to ME!!!*

And bless his heart, a well-meaning Core group person (someone who had been part of Rick's start-up team a lot longer than I had) caught me in my frantic tub-toting and said "we" had a problem. We were out of coffee. My first thought was, "Well go make some!" Instead, I took a deep breath as said, "You'll need to take a number because right now children's ministry isn't going to happen unless I can clone myself!"

The same Rick who took a risk hiring me called me into his office on Monday. By the time he said, "Mr. Smith called me about yesterday...." I was in tears and you guessed it ---- quitting my job because I'd failed. But Rick wouldn't let me off that easy.....Not only did I learn just because I think something I don't need to say it.....

I also learned to:

3. Say "I'm sorry." Period. No excuses. Just "I'm sorry." Which is exactly what I did with Mr. Smith who was concerned about the lack of coffee. I went to his house, confessed to being out of line and said, "I'm sorry. I hope you can forgive me." His response? He cried. Then I cried. I did that a lot in those early days too. Cried and tried to quit my job.

But it was a good cry.

Mr. Smith's timing was off. But I had no right to push my stress on to him. And I was fortunate to have a leader who saw beyond my impulsive response to what my heart really needed to be.

I also learned a valuable lesson about how I do ministry and to this day I

practice this. Which is...

4. Prayer needs to be my first response. From that Sunday forward, I walked through every area I was overseeing and I prayed. I prayed for volunteers for families and that kids wouldn't get hurt and sue NHCC or New Mark. I prayed when volunteers didn't show that God would somehow either keep kids home or provide extra hands. I prayed the electronics would work. I even prayed the coffee pots would stay filled 😊

Every ministry I've led, I've continued that practice. And I have discovered my responses are much more in line with being respectful because of that.

This has translated into my personal life too. When I feel that anxious "oh no, what next?" feeling, I'm learning to pray. I may not even have the words, but I figure if I can just call out to God and ask Him to help me, that's good enough.

5. As I said, I had never been on staff in a church until we came to NHCC. And without a doubt one of the best parts of being on staff is that I not only get to work with our staff, but I get to lead volunteers! I love building teams, I love raising up leaders and I love releasing the entire thing and being a coach.

I had a ministry friend tell me this week "You're a pioneer at heart" and that's true. Pioneers know their most valuable resources and for me that's my volunteers. We would be dead in the water without volunteers. That was true 20 years ago and it's true now!

For me there is nothing better than seeing a bunch of people with very little in common come together to do something that bigger than any of them could do alone. Let me encourage you --- if you aren't volunteering in ministry at NHCC, you should give it a shot. And if you can't figure where you fit, come talk to me and we'll find a place to

start! Because getting to volunteer in the local church is an amazing life-changing experience and I don't want you to miss it!

6. I've also learned it's OK to say, "I don't know". And it's OK to ask questions.

Case in point – the remodel. My husband is the carpenter in our family! But I was blessed to be surrounded by people who brought the same passion to their work as I did to my job of being the owner's rep in the remodel. And we all rose on the shoulders of each other.

I prayed like crazy for the guys working in our building. Simple things like, "Lord, just keep them safe." One guy actually came to me and asked me if I would pray for his little girl who was in the hospital. Another guy asked me to pray for him as he went through a divorce.

I think the reason they felt safe doing this is because I regularly said, "I don't understand. Can you explain it to me?" I represented "church people" to guys who didn't have much church in their lives. And for a "pastor" to say "I don't know" about anything was a new experience. For me, I love to learn so it just opens the door for me to continue to do that.

The same is true with volunteers – i.e., the technical arts. I don't have a clue how to run most of our equipment. But draw me pictures and use little words and I can make reasonable leadership decisions. And every week I learn something new! I'm sure the guys and gals on our tech team get tired of hearing me say, "Now how does that work?" But the truth is, it gives me great joy to see their passion in describing something they love to do.

7. Live life without regrets. One of the best and hardest parts of what I do is to sit with folks while a loved one is dying. I'm humbled to be included in such a private time. And each time I watch a person pass from this life into eternity reminds me life is precious and it's short and

we never know how long we have.

On my last sabbatical I started a simple practice of taking just a few minutes each night and reflecting on the day....what was good and what I would do differently. I don't spend hours – just a few minutes.

If I sense I need to say “thank you” or “I’m sorry” or “I love you” or maybe send an encouraging email or just check in with someone, I make a note of that. And the next day I make a point to do those things.

Life is short. And I don't want to have regrets that can be avoided.

8. Loss is hard and grief hurts. We weren't made to go through loss. It's an ugly part of what happens from living in a fallen world. Don't let anyone try to convince you you'll just “get over” the passing of a loved one, the pain of divorce, the death of a dream. You won't.

It will catch you by surprise and it will twist your heart in ways you didn't know were possible. And truly, these are some of the hardest things we face in this life. The pain will heal; but the scare will remain. And it will ache just as a healed physical injury can hurt years after it happened.

For me, accepting the pain of grief as a reality instead of something I should just “get over” has gone a long way to teaching me how to deal with it. After the death of my dad 10 years ago, I ended up in a counselor's office saying something like, “It just hurts too much.” His reply was, “you have no choice. You have to go right through the middle of this pain. If you don't, you will eventually close yourself off from everyone around you and will no longer be a pastor.

“but if you do the hard work of grieving, you will be better at your work. You will be able to sit with those who grieve and offer comfort simply by being there.”

I agree with my counselor. To the point if I wasn't working at NHCC, I would be working for hospice. Grief hurts. But God can use it for good.

9. When you've been in a church for 20 years, you see people leave. Sometimes we get to celebrate people going toward new beginnings. One of my first experiences in this was when Darrin Patrick left our staff about 5 years in to move to St. Louis and plant The Journey. We had shared an office (complete with his smelly gym clothes), a computer (from which he managed to delete all of my files) and a phone (which he occasionally answered but rarely wrote down a message).

Darrin and I saw life in similar ways. And when he told me he was moving to St. Louis, I really wasn't sure I wanted to continue in ministry at NHCC. I actually think that was the last time I seriously considered quitting because I learned a lot from him – and I was pretty sure I was going to fail miserably if he left.

But I didn't. It hurt when he left, but I was able to celebrate him going to expand God's Kingdom. And sometimes I have failed; but I'm not a failure. Darrin and I fought together, we worked together and when he left, we cried together. But we have continued to live out what God has called us to do and celebrate that we got to do that together for a season.

But there are other times when people simply disappear and it's not nearly as positive. Sometimes they're upset with a staff member or another NHCC or even God. So they just go away. And the pain of that is almost like a death. Yes, God can bring about restoration and sometimes we get to see that. But it's a fact --- if you walk out the door with unresolved issues, it's much more difficult to walk back in.

And for those of us in leadership, our hearts are human and it really hurts when people just leave. Sometimes it makes us wonder if doing this church thing is really worth it. We know it is --- just it's still painful

and it takes a toll on our hearts.

10. This is the last one of my reflections – and it’s the most important because it’s specific to what I’m called to do within the church.

While I was still doing children’s ministry, Rick came to me one day and said, “Do you know what you’re called to do in ministry?” I just gave him a blank look and thought, “This is it. He’s finally gonna fire me!” 😊

Instead he just said, “I think you should think about it because I hired you to do children’s ministry. And you’re doing it well but that’s about (this much) of what you do. The rest () is this thing where people talk to you about their lives. They come to you and just open up. That doesn’t happen with me and I think you should figure out what that is.” Then he walked off.

So I did exactly that. I went home and I prayed a very simple praying ---
“God, I have no idea what “this” is but I’ll do if you’ll show me how.”

That day I was reading a passage of scripture in Isaiah and I somehow knew it was the answer to my question. Here’s what I read:

**He sent me to preach good news to the poor,
heal the heartbroken,
Announce freedom to all captives....
to comfort and to care for the needs of those who mourn....
give them bouquets of roses instead of ashes,
Messages of joy instead of news of doom,
a praising heart instead of a languishing spirit.
Rename them “Oaks of Righteousness”
planted by GOD to display his glory.**

I told Mark, my husband what I thought God was saying. And he said,

“yep, that sounds like you.” He’s a man of few words ☺

The next day I told Rick (through tears of course) and he said the same thing – “that’s you”.

So not only do I get to be part of a local church, but I get to have a part of a church that is passionate about reaching out to those inside and outside its walls. Yes, ministry is hard. But it is also rewarding beyond belief. The church is filled with warts and bumps and messy, imperfect people --- just like me. And all of us are called to represent the hope of Christ in a very dark hopeless world.

So here’s my question to you: how are you joining God in reaching the world around us? Where are you volunteering? And if you aren’t volunteering, why not? In the words of a friend of mine, “Are you afraid you’re going to mess something up so much that God can’t fix it??”

As the band plays this last song, the words are going to be on the screens. If those words represent where your heart is, that is awesome! But if not, let me encourage this week to take a look at the going deeper section in your program. Because the heart check I’ve included is one I use regularly to see just exactly what’s going on inside me, whether I’m on sabbatical or not.

Will you pray with me?

Feature – I Lift My Life Up

Closing Comments

“Thanks for being here. Have a great rest of the day.”