

Accelerate
Expand Your Influence
October 30, 2011

Introduction

Good morning everyone. It's so good to see you today. We are continuing in our series "Accelerate: Building Momentum to Change Lives."

If you were here last weekend – or if you got one of these really cool booklets in the mail – then you know that last Sunday we kicked off a two-year generosity campaign which is also called *Accelerate: Building Momentum to Change Lives* which we believe will enable us to do just that: to pursue our vision and calling as a church with an increasing momentum that will have a great spiritual impact both in our lives and in the lives of

people in this community around us who this morning who may not even be aware that we're here ... who may not even be aware of what it means to be "in Christ alone," like we just sang ... to be aware that "God so loved the world that He gave his only Son" and why that matters to them.

If you were here last weekend, or you looked at the booklet or you watched the video we posted on the Accelerate website, you also know that we're asking every person who is part of NHCC to sacrificially accelerate their giving over the next two years because that's what it's going to take in order for us to be able to accomplish our goals, the most visible being the expansion of our seating capacity. And you know, if you've been around for the past three months or so that we've been talking about two ways that might happen:

One option is to sell this facility and build something new on the 7 acre “ballfield land” we own just to the west of where 88th Street comes to an end.

We knew from the very beginning that the chances of that happening were not very high because the kind of facility we have is not amenable to many other uses. And, the commercial real estate market has kind of been in the tank the last couple of years. In fact, as I said last week, we weren't even considering this particular option until a local entity showed some interest in it. So, with all those factors in mind, we decided that we were only going to list it for a very short period of time, and that period of time ends this Tuesday. So, unless someone comes with an offer on our building tomorrow, we're probably going to still own the building in the long term. But that's okay, because the other option that we have for expanding is just as good as the sell-and-

build-next-door option and will not take near as long to complete.

And that is to push this wall out and turn the auditorium to face west, as well as improving and expanding the existing commons area.

Given that this particular option is much more likely, this past week I and one of the guys on our Advisory Council took a trip to Chicago to attend a one-day seminar put on by the church design and construction company that evaluated our land and our building back in early September. We got to meet with the senior project manager of this company (who, back in September, told us that whichever option we end up going with we all ought to “stand up and shout hallelujah” - that’s how good these two options are) ... we got to meet with this guy and talk with him at length about what it will take for us to get the ball rolling on this wall

project after the first of the year in January.

It was a very encouraging meeting and we came away even more convinced that, as great as it would be to build next door (and it's not out of the realm of possibility that our real estate agent calls tomorrow and says, "I have an offer on your building" – crazy stuff like that has happened in our history) ... as great as it would be to build something new, what we have to work with right here in this facility already is amazing. And through this *Accelerate* initiative, we can expand it, we can upgrade it and we can *pay for it* without adding to our existing mortgage. This a what I would call a long-term debt-free project. We're not going to add anything to what we owe. Plus, with the city completing 88th Street here *for free* next spring, that means our ballfield land, which has been for sale for five years or so, is infinitely now more saleable (with the road, it's going to be a lot

more interesting for people to buy) ... and that piece of property has already been appraised by our bank to be worth about \$1M. So, that's really cool and really neat how all of this is coming together.

But, a good question to ask at this point is ... *why?* Why should we even think about expanding our capacity?

Again, if you were here last week you saw this little graph I put on the screen.

This is a graph of the average attendance at weekend services here at NHCC from 2005 through the end of 2010. Every week we count the number of people who are in the building for all the activities that weekend. We count the children; we count the students; we count the people in the auditorium; we count the people out here in the commons. This is the number of people

who are in our building on a weekend during the time when we're having our services.

And you can see, over the past five years, we've been stuck between 700 and 750 people. And a big reason for that, as you can tell this morning, is that this room is functionally full at 11am on Sunday mornings ... and in this culture, on Sunday mornings, for churches, *is primetime*. You can offer services at other times (we have done that and we do do that) and you can offer additional venues like a dining hall or commons area (we have done that and we do that), but you get diminishing returns on those efforts (and we have experienced that and are experiencing that). In the end, when a room hits about 70% of capacity at primetime (and we have hit that and we are hitting it again this morning; 4 out of 5 Sundays we're better than that capacity), when that happens, you need more space.

Several years ago, our staff took a trip to Chicago to attend the Willow Creek Association Leadership Summit.

I'll never forget when Bill Hybels, the senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, stood up in front of the 4,000 or so church leaders who were gathered there for this conference in their 4,500 seat auditorium ...

... and told us that they had recently begun a capital campaign designed to build a new auditorium! And I thought to myself when I heard him say this – and I know I wasn't alone – I thought, "are you nuts? This is without a doubt one of the largest church auditoriums in the world already. Willow is already one of the largest congregations in the world. Do you *really* need something bigger than this?"

And Bill went on to explain to us the 70% rule

which I just explained to you and also the primetime rule. He said, "We've looked at our statistics over the past couple of years and we have not grown like we did earlier in our history. And we've tried other options (including *two* Saturday night services) but the problem is that we're full at 11 o'clock. So, we've come to realize that if we're going to reach more people for Christ, we have to add space."

Fast forward to three years later, they had raised the money they needed, and had built a 7,500 seat auditorium.

And guess what? The number of people involved at Willow has almost doubled since that point.

Now, I understand that Willow is a mega-church. And it is not and never has been our intention to become a mega-church. But there's wisdom to be gained from their

experience because a similar story could be told, locally, by Pleasant Valley Baptist Church, for instance.

Actually, we can tell the same story because of what happened to us when we first moved in this room, some of you remember this was just a square box, 50x50, and we pushed the wall out and made it 90x50, which is what it is now.

And, our congregation – similar to what happened at Willow and similar to what happened at Pleasant Valley – our congregation almost doubled within two years.

Of course, I'm aware that as I talk about this, that maybe some of you are having the same kind of reaction to our project as I did when I heard what Bill Hybels said. Maybe some of you are thinking:

- “Well, Rick, with 700 people in and out

of here on average every weekend, we're already one of the largest churches in the Northland. It sounds like you're saying if we expand our facility, we *will* grow. But do we really need to?"

- "Rick, you know, it's already impossible to know everyone here at NHCC. And, if you add more people (which sounds like what's going to happen) it's going to be even harder. Do we *really* want that?"
- "And, Rick, if we're going to raise all this money you're talking about – you're talking about \$2M more than what we're currently giving over the next two years – wouldn't it be smarter to take that money and pay down our debt so that we reduce our monthly mortgage payment?"
- "And what's the rush? Why not just put this building on the market and stay at

700 until it sells? Again, that's still a lot of people we're serving."

Those are some really good questions: questions that our leadership team – our pastors and lay Advisory Council – we wrestled with those questions and other questions like them for a long time before deciding to move in the direction we're moving. In fact, those kinds of questions make it possible to make a very logical, reasonable and even spiritual case against asking the people of NHCC to sacrifice financially at this time so we can increase our capacity.

And in the rest of the time we have this morning, I want to explain to you *why we decided to do it anyway*; I want to explain to you why we're not waiting for six months or six years until this building sells and we can build next door ... why we're not paying

down the debt with the money that we're going to raise ... why it's worth the hassle of even more people when you already don't know everybody who goes here ... why it's worth it to make even more room even though we're already "big enough" ... and why I am asking you and myself to think about our finances in a way we never have before; why I am asking you to be exceedingly generous beginning in December and going for two years, in spite of the present economic uncertainty.

Answering the "Why" Question

Many years ago, the Gospel of Luke tells us, a group of very logical, responsible and spiritual men came to Jesus. And they said to him (in essence – I'm paraphrasing here), "Jesus, we've been watching you and listening to you for a couple years now. We've seen you do some amazing things

and we've heard you talk about your vision of God's Kingdom; how we need to change our thinking because God's Kingdom is as much here and now as it is far and future. And even though we watch and we listen and we get it that your ministry and your message are different from what we're used to, it does make some sense to us. We're tracking with you. We're trying to buy in."

"But, Jesus, there's one thing we just don't get. We've thought about this. We've debated this. We've even prayed about this. But we don't understand why ... you feel the need ... to hang out with sinners – the tax collectors and the prostitutes and the other religious rejects. We don't understand why a guy like you, as gifted as you are, as influential as you are, would risk it all by associating with this kind of spiritual riff-raff. The truth is, you don't really need *those people* in order to carry out your ministry.

Oh, and one more thing, Jesus, just so you'll know, some of our members are pretty upset about this and they're probably going to withdraw their tentative support if you continue down this road. And, it could get a little ugly. We're just sayin', we just want you to know."

And the Bible says that Jesus answered the Pharisees with three stories ... the third being the most famous story he ever told. I'm sure you've heard it.

In fact ... I'm so sure you've heard this story – and that you know it so well – that I asked our drama team and our band to present this story to you this morning in a slightly different form than you've heard before. The goal here is to give it a freshness that sometimes is lacking when things are really, really familiar.

So, I'm going to sit down and be quiet for the next 12-15 minutes and let them answer all of those logical ... reasonable ... and even "spiritual" ... questions about the need to make more room.

Drama – “Possibility”
Feature – “You Are More”

More than the choices you've made
More than the sum of your past
mistakes

More than the problems you create

Because it's not about what you've
done

But what's been done for you

That's a message that the prodigal sons and daughters of Jesus' day needed to hear. And it's a message that the prodigals of our day

need to hear. And the invitation they need to hear is just like it: "Whatever you have done. Whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come home."

Maybe this morning some of you need to hear that and understand that for the very first time. Maybe some of us need to be reminded again – for the umpteenth time – that it really isn't about what we've done (how good we've been or how bad we've been) that determines our standing before God. It's about what Jesus has done. In "Christ alone" we sang earlier. Because He went to the cross, and he took our place, and he paid for our sin, we can come home to our Heavenly Father and find grace and forgiveness and restoration.

Now, I know at this point, some of the more

skeptical among us might be thinking “I see what you’re doing, Rick. You guys are really pouring on the emotion today. You’re getting everybody kind of weepy and sentimental about this story that Jesus told ... and then you’re going to turn around and ask everyone to dig deep over the next two years and give so you can do whatever project you think God is telling you to do. I understand.”

And, I understand why someone might think that because there is a fine line here. It’s not my intention to be manipulative here, but the possibility is there ... if ... if ...

- The story Jesus told was just that: just a story.
- If prodigal sons and daughters never do feel a longing to come home to God.
- If the story Jesus told never really happens to anyone that we know.
- And if it never happens here at NHCC.

But it does happen here ... a lot.

In fact, just recently, a young woman made an appointment to come talk to me about some of the problems she's facing in her life right now. For about an hour we discussed some of the choices she's made; some of the mistakes that got her to where she is today. And we talked about the need to be wiser going forward – to understand that the decisions made in the next few months will determine what reality is like five years and ten years from now.

But there was nothing profound about anything I said in all that. But, then, as we were wrapping it up, she said: "I really need to come back to God and the church. That's a big reason why I came to see you. But, with all that's happened I just need to know: *is it OK if I come to church?*"

Can you believe that? Can you believe that someone would worry about whether or not it was OK to come home to God?

I can, because, those kinds of conversations happen a lot around here. A lot of times they happen behind the scenes in a pastor's office, although if you're in a small group, you might get to hear one from time to time.

I said to her: "Well, let's just be clear; we can't pretend that the decisions you've made are right. Truth is you are where you are because of sin." And then I said, "But we have a God who loves sinners and forgives sin. And because of that, this church loves sinners; This church is a forgiving church. So, yes, *absolutely*, you can come! Absolutely, you're welcome here! And if anyone tells you that you are not, let me know and I'll come kick their butt."

(Spiritually speaking, of course, in Christian love).

And the reason I said that is because ...

We believe, at this church, that “lost” people matter to God as much as “found” people do.

Lost people – people who have wandered away from God, or even run away from God like we saw in the drama – deserve to have as much effort invested in them as those who are no longer lost – those who have already found their way back to God.

And just so you’ll know, not everyone who is “lost” is as desperate as the girl in the drama ... or the young man in the story as Jesus told it to the Pharisees ... or that 20-something woman who sat in my office ... or the 40-something man who sat in Kitti’s office recently and told much the same story.

Sometimes lost people are a lot like ... well, just watch.

Video – “Reach Seekers”

Could we express our appreciation for Jay & Jenny and Freddie & Nichole sharing their story? We appreciate you guys. Thank you.

Everyone needs God. Everyone needs to come home. Everyone needs a savior. Everyone needs to be forgiven. But *the way we come to that realization* is different for each of us.

- It hits some of us because we have kids, like Jay and Jenny. And kids have a way of leading us to think about bigger issues that we might not have considered before.
- It hits others of us because there's a sense that even though life is good, like

it was for Freddie and Nichole, something is missing. There's more.

- And it hits others of us because we've messed up and we want to come "home" to God.

And when those "aha" moments happen to someone and they begin to seek God, someone else needs to be there whether they're a "respectable sinner" or a "desperate sinner" or even a "despicable sinner." That was the point of Jesus' story. That was his answer to the Pharisees as to why he sometimes hung out with tax collectors and prostitutes and other notorious sinners.

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick ... For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."
Matthew 9:11,13 (NIV)

... which is why he also told them ...

"There is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." Luke 15:7 (NIV)

Lost people matter to God ... so they ought to matter to those of us who have already been found.

And when people who want to come home to God *realize* they want to come home to God, the first place many of them turn is to a church ... at 11 o'clock on a Sunday morning. It's true. It's how it works in our culture.

And that's our answer to the why question.

- It answers why we chose a two-month

listing on our building instead of waiting for six months or six years for it to sell. We're not in the real estate business. Our main venue – this auditorium – is not simply an asset to be bought or sold. It's a place for people to meet God. And it's not big enough.

- It's also why we're putting money into expansion instead of paying down the debt. Don't hear what I'm not saying: financial stewardship matters. It does! But it's not what matters *most*. It's important, but it's not what's *most* important. One of these days, assuming we don't sell this building tomorrow, we're going to sell that land out there, and then maybe we'll use that money to pay down the debt. Or maybe we'll just do what 95% of the people in this room do – you make your mortgage payment, over and over and over, and one day, it

goes away. I mean, getting rid of your mortgage would be wonderful but it's not what's *most* wonderful. Lost people coming home to God – *that* is what's most wonderful.

- And that's why we're going to do our best to figure out how to handle more people instead of turning them away.
- And it's why I will be asking you three weeks from today to make a commitment to be exceedingly generous – whatever that looks like for you - over the next two years.

And again, I realize that a skeptical person could say, "I get it, Rick. I understand what you're driving at, but seriously, come on, if people *really* want God ... if whatever is going on in their life is so bad or so compelling that they're going to come to

church, shouldn't they be more concerned about *that* than the fact that they come and the room is 70% or 80% or even 90% full? I mean, so what if it's hard to find a seat in here sometimes? If people really want to come home to Jesus, come on, they can deal with that. And if they can't, then they can get here earlier. There's room in the beginning; there is not a lot of people here. Or they can come to the 9:30 service where there's plenty of room, or they can sit in the dining hall or the commons and watch the service."

And, I suppose that's all true. But, two weeks ago, we had one of the most amazing days ever at NHCC. Most of you were here and saw it. Almost 80 adults and teenagers on the spot said "yes" to receiving and following Jesus as their savior and leader or to following him in baptism, if they had already made that decision earlier in their life. They literally got up out of their seats,

went down the hall to change clothes, came back in, lined up here, and for a half an hour we dunked person after person after person in the tank. And not one of them, walking into the building that morning, expected that anything of the sort would happen. I mean, if you would have met them in the parking lot that morning and said, "Hey, how do you feel about getting baptized today? Do you think that'll happen today in the service?" They would have all said, "What? Are you crazy? No!" But they all did. All of those people said "yes."

And that afternoon after the services, I got in my car to drive away after it was all over, I felt like the Holy Spirit said to me, "Rick, do you understand what you've just seen?" And at the time I said, "I don't think I do, because I'm kind of overwhelmed with the emotion of it."

But, I thought about it over the next couple of days and two things came to me. One of those I wrote about in a post on The City – our online communications system here at NHCC. It’s still out there if you want to read it. But the other thing that came to me, I haven’t said anything about until this morning.

What I saw on Mystery Sunday was *the value of removing the artificial barriers* for people ... of going the extra mile to make it easier for people to say yes to God. That’s what we did that day. We had clothing here for people to change into; we had towels, we had a place to change; we took care of people’s belongings, we had security; we had people out there helping them make it happen. Once we made it clear that all of those things were going to be provided, people could hear the invitation and say to themselves, just like in the Bible, “Here is

water. What prevents me from being baptized?"

And the only answer at that point was ... "Nothing. Well, nothing *except* ... for my own *pride* ... that does not want to admit that I, yes, even clean-cut Rick McGinniss, I too, am a sinner, desperately in need of a savior; my *pride* doesn't want to do this silly thing that Jesus said we should do with this water and this dunking."

And, friends, here's the deal, *pride*, is a big enough barrier in itself. It already *is* hard to say yes to Jesus, to follow Jesus, to sign up! Even though the forgiveness is free, even though grace is free, it is one of the hardest decisions a person will ever make - to say "yes" to Jesus - "I'm going to give up that; I'm going to accept this. I'm going to live his way instead of my way." And, *we do not need to make it any more difficult* by making it hard

to find a stinking seat in here. That's craziness! It's hard enough.

Conclusion

So, the question before us as a church is whether or not we will remove a barrier.

Well, actually, it's a little more substantial than that. The question is ...

Will we say “yes,” as a church, to the opportunity that God is giving us in this Accelerate campaign to expand our spiritual influence in this community?

And there is no doubt that expanding our influence is what Jesus wants us – and, quite frankly, every church – to do.

Sometimes I think Christians forget this. I think Christians forget that Jesus did not have a small vision for his church, which is

why He told his first followers to “go into all the world” and tell people about Him so that there would be even more people who would follow him who would tell even more people about him so there would be more people who would follow him.... Do you get the picture? Churches are supposed to grow by reaching people who do not know God, and/or planting other churches that will do the same thing.

And that’s a huge part – if you’ve looked in the book, if you saw the video, if you were here last week – that’s a huge part of this Accelerate initiative. What you and I contribute over the next two years, beginning in December, is going to have an impact far beyond ourselves. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, it is going to do for other people what was once done for us. (In fact, this is our theme verse for Accelerate).

Paul wrote:

*Pray that the Lord's message
will spread rapidly and be
honored wherever it goes,
just as when it came to you.*

*2 Thessalonians 3:1
(NLT)*

Just as when it came to you. Somebody, somewhere along the line, made a sacrifice for you. Somebody, somewhere along the line, said, "we need more space here, and we're going to give." Somebody, somewhere, made a sacrifice for you. And that's what we get to do. This is our chance, friends, to play a part in making a difference; in being part of something bigger than us. Expanding our influence. You know, most of us, our influence is so small. I mean, we have such a narrow circle. And God has given us this great opportunity to play in a much larger environment. And that's what Accelerate is like. And, I think, one day - it's

only been two weeks ago - but sometime we can sit around and say, "Do you remember what happened that day at North Heartland when we did that Mystery Sunday, when all those people got baptized?" I think, that some day, people are going to look back and say, "do you remember that Accelerate campaign thing we did, when we pushed out that wall? Do you remember that? It was a game changer for so many people in this community."

And in a couple of weeks, you and I are going to get the opportunity to make a commitment, financially, to seeing that happen. And, what I want to ask you to do today is to start thinking about that; start praying about that. And I know some of you freak out when we talk about money, but you know how we are, we aren't going to twist anybody's arm about giving, we just put it out there and you do what God tells you to

do. And, next week, in the message, I'm going to talk about where we are financially, individually. How does this affect us individually? A no-guilt sermon on what we're doing financially, how this can work for you. So, I want to challenge you to be here; challenge you to start praying about what God wants you to do. In fact, next Sunday evening, the leaders of our church will gather together to have a time of worship, and we're going to make our commitment, before anybody else does, because, the leaders ought to go first. If the leaders aren't in, nobody else needs to be in. So, next week, that's going to happen with our leaders and our key volunteers – just so you'll know what's going on.

We're going to close right now and we'll receive our offering on this last song, and maybe, some of you need to begin your generosity now as we take the offering. And

if that's what God is putting on your heart, feel free to do that. Let's pray.

God, thank you, thank you for loving us so much that you took the risk, that even though you didn't need us, you took the risk anyway. And you came and you gave your life and you made it possible for us to have grace. And, then, God, You raised up other people around us, many we didn't even know - the people I think of are at Grace Baptist Church, in Bowie, Maryland, when I was 15 years old. I didn't know half the people who started that church. I don't know the people who met in that garage. But, they had a vision and they had a heart, and they cared. And because of them, I get to experience what I experience now. I'm so thankful for them. God, I pray that we would be *those* people for people we don't even know today. People that, this morning, are sleeping in or are getting ready to watch a

football game, and they're clueless, and they feel this emptiness inside and they don't know what it is - but we do. God, I pray that you would use us to reach them. I pray that You would build us up as we do that. God, I pray that there would be prosperity in this congregation so that we have what it takes to give, because we only give back what you have given to us first. God help us not to miss this opportunity. Help us not to blink when we have this great moment in front of us. And we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

Endnotes