



2015 "State of the Church address" ...we respond.

Pastor Tim Dodson, at Jesus Fellowship of Believers,
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Mark Twain once said, "*The two most important days of your life are the day you were born, and the day you find out why.*" I am blessed to have experienced both of these. For I have no doubt that I was born for this. And knowing that fact makes me seriously determined to continue this race both personally and pastorally. This year...2015, this coming Easter, will be 25 years since I walked into the fellowship that would

one day become this family...*Jesus Fellowship of Believers*. It has at times been the most difficult and oft painful experience of my life, while simultaneously being the greatest and most wonderful joys I have ever known and frankly could have ever dreamed. Therefore I guess one could then say it all was "classic ministry." Such a pitched battle serves therefore as the gauge that I use to know whether I am still on the path...still on that road that God has called me to and called this community to. As Charles Dickens said and I often ascribe to, "It was the best of times and it was the worst of times."

I don't know however if I will ever be totally comfortable in this 'uniform.' But I know my God is sovereign...all knowing and all powerful and intimately and intrinsically involved in humanity, this church and thus even my personal life. Recently a pastor I know tried to espouse an anti-biblical position that God doesn't place those He wants, nor does he 'take out' those He does not want. He said "God doesn't do that." That is a different God than I worship, and a different one from scripture where Jesus says in Matthew 15:13 that "*Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted.*" MY God is *in control*...

When it comes to the living out of the faith, my mind always operates in 'epic mode.' Meaning that even the most grandiose adjectives and emphatic superlatives fail to describe the wonder of this journey nor do they sufficiently ascribe the credit where it is due. Words cannot express the passion and the blessings of not only *being* one of God's kids but *knowing* it, and further *living* it. And it is what comes next that separates the sheep from the goats...the legendary from the forgettable...the glorious from the benign: *Moving from saved to disciple*. One of the critical crossroads of finding and thus fulfilling one's purpose and destiny on this planet is our willingness to allow Christ the position of *Lord* of one's life as well as *Savior*.

One could imagine perhaps that after 25 years we might believe we have seen it all here and done it all. That we have accomplished what we set out do and have finished our objectives. That now we can rest in what we have and bask in the glory of our accomplishments. But in fact, there just seems so much yet to do as God unfurls His grand plan for us like the petals of a rose. And further, if we have come to know and understand anything in these past 25 years, it is the reality that they are not and never have been *our* accomplishments, but rather all His. All God's. And resting is never an option on this side of eternity. Time is short. His return seems to be near, and certainly our lives are so very short and thus either way we have precious little time to fulfill our personal and corporate calling. We have a mission to complete.

Private First Class Edward H. Ahrens...During the Battle of Tulagi in WW2, was mortally wounded while single-handedly fighting back a group of Japanese soldiers attempting to infiltrate Allied lines. After his superior officer discovered Ahrens the next morning surrounded by dead Japanese troops, he whispered the following words before he died: "***The ('expletives') tried to come over me last night. I guess they didn't know I was a Marine.***"

The world of believers has very few of such men and women, few who are so willing to die to self for God and kingdom and by doing so find life. But I am blessed...*we are blessed*, to have a number of them in this fellowship, and as they say in battle "it has been an honor to serve with you." There has, *of course*, been casualties. In war there are always casualties! And there has been alot of AWOL's too. Those who were seeking a comfortable desk job...out of the actual fighting, ...out of the fray of Satan's attacks. Ant there are those who want to pretend there is no war or that they have nothing to do with it. These are "Switzerland Christians." They believe they are just "neutral."

I could at this yearly juncture give you the facts and the figures, the numbers, the graphs and the dollar amounts in painful detail. But such is personally subjective, easily forgettable and imminently viewed as outside of your personal attention and responsibility. While we as your leadership seek to be accountable and transparent on the issue of spending and priorities, I also believe it is more important for you to be aware of vision and direction, and the part that you and each of us is to play in this

community, this church. If you are a tithing participant in this fellowship, you will be given a brief accounting sheet for your information, and the a report with all the financial details available in the bookstore for you to look at if you desire. This info is available only to those who have committed themselves to this family and its ministry efforts financially. That being said, what is the forward vision of this community?

#1 - MISSION "*Making Disciples and Planting Churches*"

When the book of Matthew is coming to a close and Jesus is returning bodily to the Father, He left some instructions that we embrace as our own today in this fellowship. He said "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*" Amen.

The greater church seems to grasp the concept of evangelism and proselytization, but what happened to discipleship? Jesus sought for us to "make disciples," and "*be disciples*" not merely seek and be *converts*. Perhaps we have abandoned such ideas because frankly it's just *hard*. Such takes commitment, time and effort on all sides of the equation...for all parties involved, both the student *and* the teacher! It's just a whole lot easier to seek forgiveness and salvation alone then it is to go on to pursue subsequent sanctification, holiness, and service. It's just a whole lot easier staying a child and living out a life of chips and video games on our parents couch than it is to grow up, train and discipline, and then go out to live large. And such is virtually impossible for those who do not grasp what is at stake for everyone around them. It is incomprehensible for those who do not know the motivation of action due to a love's passion.

CT Studd quote: "*Too long have we been waiting for one another to begin! The time of waiting is past! The hour of God has struck! War is declared! In God's Holy Name let us arise and build! 'The God of Heaven, He will fight for us', as we for Him. We will not build on the sand, but on the bedrock of the sayings of Christ, and the gates and minions of hell shall not prevail against us. Should such men as we fear? Before the world, aye, before the sleepy, lukewarm, faithless, namby-pamby Christian world, we will dare to trust our God, we will venture our all for Him, we will live and we will die for Him, and we will do it with His joy unspeakable singing aloud in our hearts. We will a thousand times sooner die trusting only our God, than live trusting in man. And when we come to this position the battle is already won, and the end of the glorious campaign in sight. We will have the real Holiness of God, not the sickly stuff of talk and dainty words and pretty thoughts; we will have a Masculine Holiness, one of daring faith and works for Jesus Christ.*"

For us, our desire is also for those other words of CT Studd..."*some want to live within the sound of a church or chapel bell, but I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell.*" Such has always been our heart, and I pray that it always is! That road is not the easy road, or the quietest, or the one that builds the largest sunday congregation attendance. But it does build the *strongest* congregation, and one that reproduces and furthers God's work and His kingdom. That's who we aspire to be. So slow and steady we have grown...year after year. And we have grown strong not just larger.

We could encourage you that are hungry for Jesus and His service to find a seminary or a bible school somewhere, but we have always felt it was God's plan to disciple "up close" and personal. Right here in our house. Right here in our midst. The way Jesus trained His twelve. Again, it's expensive and time-consuming and difficult at times. But this is where we train them up. This is the role of the church. In real time, in real life, and in real situations. Studd once again says... "*The best training for a soldier of Christ is not merely a theological college. They always seem to turn out sausages of varying lengths, tied at each end, without the glorious freedom a Christian ought to abound and rejoice in. You see, when in hand-to-hand conflict with the world and the devil, neat little biblical confectionery is like shooting lions with a pea-shooter: one needs a man who will let himself go and deliver blows right and left as hard as he can hit, trusting in the Holy Ghost. It's experience, not preaching that hurts the devil and confounds the world. The training is not that of the schools but of the market: it's the hot, free heart and not the balanced head that knocks the devil out. Nothing but forked-lightning Christians will count. A lost reputation is the best degree for Christ's service. It is not so much the degree of arts that is needed, but that of hearts, loyal and true, that love not their lives to the death: large and loving hearts which seek to save the lost multitudes, rather than guard the ninety-nine well-fed sheep in the (British) pen.*"

All this being said, such discipleship will continue to be a priority around here. We will continue to teach, mentor, serve, and push ourselves into the realm of the uncomfortable. We will seek to be "back on our heels" where God must come through or we sink like fearful Peter as he walked to Jesus on the water. There is no let up in sight. There is no 'spiritual vacation' imminent here. There are plenty of churches around where you can find a comfortable seat and hear a comfortable sermonette one day a week and everybody can pretend that everything is perfect in their lives and then you can go home and live like the rest of the world all week. But this church isn't one of them. For a couple of years ago we declared verbally what we had been for many years practically, ...that we are an "Intentional Christian *Community*." Not just a "Sunday-go-to-meeting" group of religious

folks. We wanted more and we wanted to *be* more in the stark brevity of this life! So we sought God to actually "Disturb Us Lord" as Francis Drake said... so we might *dare more boldly, To venture on wider seas...*

And thus He did so. And some folks folded and returned to the couch. But others became spiritual marines, and are willing to fight to the death...standing incredulously on that hill saying "I guess they didn't know I was a marine." And today we drop that dime and make that call and ask the Lord "*more of that please...*" For we are and seek to always be a disciples fellowship. Schools of believers, disciples, and ministry. Each walking the child of God from bootcamp to the field of battle. Each designed to guide the believer to find his gifts, the infilling of the Holy Spirit of God, and His place in the body of Christ..*His church*, of which the "gates of hell will not prevail." We will go on now to serve God, church, and each other. Such will always be a foundational element of who we are. Our love compels us to move ...to *action*. And we will do so with intent! Intentional living, so that our brothers and sisters will find Him, come to know Him, and will step up to their created purpose. That place of wholeness. That place where we know *why* we were born!

A few years ago, we began the tedious work of church planting. We lost a few times, but finally we landed in the right place, and God has done a work up in Duluth. They are the "frozen chosen" up there! And we love the fact that they are part of us! I am enormously proud of Justin and Mike as well as their wives Sarah and Sheena. I know first hand the hardship of such an endeavor. The often loneliness... the discouragements, the attacks of Satan. Planting a church is *HARD*. But I would liken it to climbing Mt Everest. It's dangerous, physically challenging, time-consuming, and expensive. One must put his or her life on hold to train and prepare for such a climb. It's all so crazy...surreal and incredulous, to take on such an endeavor. But nothing...*nothing*, compares to that moment of standing at the top. For at the place, all the time and effort and pain are lost in the awe of...like Moses of old, "beholding his glory." The presence of God is surpassed only by His faithfulness throughout the process.

We are far from done in Duluth. The game is on. The battle is currently being played out. But they have moved along there to the point that they have people in the School of Ministry, people traveling overseas with us to the mission field, and those participating in national missions in Mississippi. They have established correctional missions, and a campus "street level" organization at UW Superior. They have a great church building up there...that in itself is but one of God's miracles. They are fully "engaged" ...reaching outside of themselves and will no doubt continue to do so.

Thus at this point we are able to step back and look around at what else...*where else*, God would like us to serve. Beginning this year we intend to get behind a school of ministry graduate (Jonah Johnson) and seek to establish a Street Level on the River Falls campus, as well as ultimately planting a church there. The plan is to have the O'gara's back him up and assist in this church plant. This will involve financial support, prayer support and ultimately no doubt physical support from all of us. This endeavor stems forth from our commitment to missions; *overseas developing countries, right to our own back yard*.

We are looking afresh at this issue of 'missions outreach' and realizing that perhaps a review and a reinterpretation of those words are due. For we cannot continue to see missions as merely the outreach in far away lands over the oceans. We must see them also as what we do in our work places, our neighborhoods, our 'back-yards.' We must see the Duluth church plant as a mission. The River Falls work as a mission. Even Street Level and our radio station as a mission. Our faith must be larger than this singular church, and more than sending money to support foreign evangelism. Our overseas work is so very important but it cannot be all we do in this area. So what's up ahead...what's that mean for us? It means that each of us must learn in a greater way to be missionaries. Each of ministering for King and kingdom in the small "country" in which God has placed us in each day.

#2 - "MESSAGE" *The Gospel of Jesus Christ*

The tide is strong today to pull away from the scriptures, to compromise with absolutes and adhere to a conditional and situational faith ethic. **We will not.** Let us not confuse such a statement with a *fundamental stance*. I am not saying we intend to hunker down and do things the way we have always done them for the sake of entrenched dogma. We will intensely reach out, but we will never attempt to change the "colonel's secret recipe." That being said, we will focus this year on what the gospel *IS* and what it means in its totality. For the gospel is more than "Jesus died for our sins." It goes beyond this to effect "*Jesus died for our sins, so what does that mean to me, my living, my priorities, my eternity?*"

We must ask the questions: *If we are redeemed by Christ, how then shall we live, and what else has changed about me and my world in light of my salvation?* Because the real gospel makes real change...*radical change*. We must never allow any other soft 'Jesus-lite' position to find feet here in this church. The gospel shines it's light on all aspects of our community and our participation in it. But what does it mean to belong to 'the church?' It is a question we have methodically pursued over this past

year and that we will seek to apply this next year as we move closer to acknowledging a "covenant membership" in this fellowship.

#3 MINISTRY - "*Love God and love your neighbor.*"

Herein lies the big concept for us this year. If I were to place a title...a 'key word' on this churches endeavors and direction in 2015, it would be the word "*missional*." This is more than "missions" as we traditionally think of such.

In Christianity, **missional living** is the adoption of the posture, thinking, behaviors, and practices of a missionary in order to engage others with the gospel message. The missional living concept is rooted in the *Missio dei* (Latin, "the sending of God"). According to the gospel of John, every Christian has been sent by Jesus with the gospel together in community to those in the surrounding culture for the sake of the King and His kingdom. The Church therefore is sent into the world to continue that which Jesus came to do, in the power of that same Spirit, reconciling people to God. Jesus said, "As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you" (John 20:21).

Thomas Hale quote says this: "*No one can say: 'Since I'm not called to be a missionary, I do not have to evangelize my friends and neighbors.' There is no difference, in spiritual terms, between a missionary witnessing in his home town and a missionary witnessing in Katmandu, Nepal. We are all called to go—even if it is only to the next room, or the next block.*"

Missional living is the embodiment of the mission of Jesus in the world by incarnating the gospel. Mark Driscoll says "*It is imperative that Christians be like Jesus, by living freely within the culture as missionaries who are as faithful to the Father and his gospel as Jesus was in his own time and place.*" This embodiment of the gospel is often referred to as "contextualization" or "inculturation." Authors Paul and Eliose Hiebert, in the book ***Incarnational Ministry*** says this: "*Both (of these words) refer to more than a simple translation of the gospel into different languages and cultures in the way that one translates a history book or a science text. Rather, they point to the embodiment of the living Word in human culture and social settings in such a way that its divine nature and power are not lost. True contextualization is more than communication. It is God working in the hearts of people, making them new and forming them into a new community. It is his Word transforming their lives, their societies, their cultures.*"

The bottom line is that we must continue...and even increase, our "living out" and our "going out." Not merely to other countries or even other states and cultures. These are all good, and we must *and we will* continue such, but this means more about engaging our direct and immediate surroundings. Our city, our work places, our classrooms, our businesses. So we will train, and we will prepare and we will act accordingly. We will not wait for the lost to come to us. We will go to them. But such a frontal offensive priority calls for preparation, training, communication, and commitment. This endeavor will therefore affect nearly every decision and endeavor we partake in here at JFB.

No one has to tell us that true faithful Christianity is on the decline throughout the world. No doubt much of that decline can be attributed to the failure of the church to engage and communicate the living gospel in the real world. Such cannot be relegated to an existence behind the walls of the local church. Matthew 5:15 reminds us that "*No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house.*" We must be salt and light indeed...a "peculiar people" ...separate in heart, passions, and priorities. But we cannot hide behind these walls while the world is dying. Jesus went out...eating with sinners, and rubbing shoulders with the lost. And by doing so, and ultimately giving himself to them, He was "lifted up" upon the cross of our gospel, all of which to "draw everyone to (him)self." (John 12:32)

There are indeed internal issues here that continue to need our attention. There are marriage issues, parenting issues, and family financial practices to deal with. There are so many distractions in our world to sideline us and to deter our commitment and our sacrifice. We have not "arrived" at any holy level that would allow us to set down the spiritual mirrors that we need to daily peer into. But we cannot become inward in our focus either.

And we will not fail to regularly stop and embrace our family here and the joy of being one of God's kids and one of the family of Jesus Fellowship. We will regularly "break bread together". We will laugh together and play together and wrap our arms of love around each other, never to forget how incredibly blessed we are to not only have Christ and salvation, but because of such we have each other. Let us live our time here in love.

Thank you for the love you have shown me, and the great love you have shown each other. Let us now go out there and love the lost and dying. Let us take the light into the darkness...