

On Smoky Row

Introduction:

Smoky Row! I'm excited about today.

We're talking about ourselves, a little bit. Our stuff. Who we are, where we are, our present and our future, what makes us so uniquely special and what real challenges we face, which faith will test and God will carry us beyond.

I typically try to do a sort of "State of the Union" message early in the year, but honestly, I didn't want to break much in our walk through the Minor Prophets, so we just didn't have it, then. So today it is!

I want to encourage us, prepare us, and focus us this morning. Take a posture of interest, of wonder. Be invested in what I'm about to share, because it matters for the world, for God's Kingdom, and I pray for each of us.

Let's pray.

Prayer:

Bringing To Mind: Purpose

Let me remind us, or if we haven't really heard it before, of who we say we are. This stuff is on our bulletins; some of us took part in Life Group conversations all about it. If we've

gone through membership classes we've talked about it, but it can fade in our memories.

“We join together to pursue God’s love, become more like Jesus, and expand God’s Kingdom through word and deed.”

“We join together,” our Purpose Statement says, “to pursue God’s love, become more like Jesus, and expand God’s Kingdom through word and deed.”

Every congregation exists for something like this. The purpose of the Church just doesn't change much. The reason for this particular congregation or that particular congregation to live, to move, to have its being isn't very different from this one to that one. How we frame why we exist is always different; it's unique, always, and meant to be. And look, every organization--every person, really--has a purpose of some kind. Usually we flail around, never quite making it explicit what we exist for, why we believe we're alive and what we're meant to do with ourselves. We operate with some kind of implicit purpose, unspoken reason for being. The fact that our congregational reason for being can be made explicit, remembered and checked in with, is a great gift.

Our Purpose Statement is organized around the four spiritual movements that a person or group of Christians make. We join together, move outward in fellowship, to pursue God's

love, as we move upward in worship, and so we become more like Jesus, as we move on an inward journey of inner Spirit-given transformation, and we move forward, in ministry and mission, to expand God's Kingdom through word and deed.

Some congregations will talk about preaching the gospel, some will talk about bearing witness to Christ. We recognize our status as privileged citizens of the Kingdom of God, emphasizing the way we do as Jesus did, by word and deed revealing just how powerful our God is, the rights God has over all creation, until Jesus' return.

Purpose Statements are kind of interesting. They do reveal how a congregation frames its sense of who it is, the words and ways a particular congregation decides to say what it sees as the basic identity of the capital-C Church. And ours, you know, starts with the way we gather together around Jesus, remembering God's love for us as we embody him and his message in the world. Great. It's a very practical way of framing what it means to be the Church, and the truth is that we're people "on the ground," practical people.

Bringing To Mind: Core Values:

But its our congregational core values--those things that we believe we simply can't live without--that make us unique. And again, each of us live with core values, too, the habits and practices we have that make us, us. To lose them is to lose ourselves, and we protect them without even realizing it.

Very few of us--too few of us--know what these area. And to know them as a congregation, again, is so good.

And here's what we say that Smoky Row can't live without, and still be Smoky Row.

Contextual Brethren Life:

We're committed to Contextual Brethren Life. That is, we're guided by traditions and values that shape our identity as a Brethren church, but we apply these traditions and values in ways that fit our context. And the truth is that our contributions to our wider denomination are significant: Smoky Row folks are on denominational and regional boards, are faculty at Ashland Theological Seminary. We're have incredibly significant influence among the Brethren Churches and church plants in Central Ohio. There's a reason that our denominational Core Values are so close to Smoky Row's; it's because our influence helped shape the denomination's! And we're like Brethren Churches in so many ways--our theological and biblical heritage affects how we frame what it means to follow Jesus. But we're suburban, not rural, not located in some small country town like so many Brethren Churches. That affects us deeply and changes our character from many of our sister churches.

Prophetic Multiculturalism:

We're committed to Prophetic Multiculturalism. We desire to be a community marked by healthy, integrative

multiculturalism. This is a prophetic commitment, which looks to the future when those “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues” give praise to God (Rev 7:9). This matters to us. Not so long ago we were home to a Spanish-speaking congregation; as the Northwest Columbus population shifted, we’ve responded, housing a Korean-speaking congregation. We nurtured a Roma congregation for months, until it finally folded a few months ago. Last week we had a potluck with West Side Assembly, part of the largest protestant Ghanian denomination in the world, and it was awesome. We offer our space for a German Playgroup, and there’s nothing more cute than little kids speaking german. I don’t know why. We continue to influence the greater Spanish-speaking Christian community through our relationships with RED pastoral; Rudy’s preaching at another congregation in Spanish on August 12th. Smoky Row Food Pantry is more than bilingual, and a place where mandarin-speakers can be understood. It’s not as immediately relevant for us to have our text slides in Spanish and to sing Spanish songs right now in our congregational life, but doing so reminds us that every time we hear about Spanish-speaking immigrants on TV, we’re hearing about people God loves, about many of our neighbors and those we serve. It’s a call back for us to this critical value, and, just honestly, I think I think the coming months will bring more opportunities to engage in Spanish-speaking immigrant work, both denominationally and regionally, than the previous months have offered.

Intentional Christian Hospitality, Dynamic Corporate Worship, Biblical Spiritual Formation, Empowering Servant Leadership:

We're committed to Intentional Christian Hospitality.

We're committed to Dynamic Corporate Worship.

We're committed to Biblical Spiritual Formation.

We're committed to Empowering Servant Leadership.

Let's stop for a moment and talk about these:

An Aside, For A Moment:

When it comes to the care we show each other; when it comes to the whole-life worship we offer to God or what our times gathering together do to propel us forward; when it comes to the way we lean into the Bible, and seek simple faithfulness and deeper transformation into people like Jesus; when it comes to what it means to provide our talents and time to those around us, when it comes to these...we are as faithful as we can be at the size we are. We're as faithful as we can be for our size.

And I say it this way because, if you didn't notice, we're just not a large congregation. We'll come back to this. First, though, there are two more Core Values that we have to look at.

Needs-Oriented Outreach & Kingdom-Building

Stewardship:

We're committed to Needs-Oriented Outreach, by which mean that we're committed to communicating the Good News of Jesus both nearby and farther away. Such outreach focuses on meeting the real needs and the felt needs that people have.

We're committed to Kingdom-building Stewardship. We recognize our responsibility to act as stewards of all that God has given us. The ultimate goal of our stewardship is to extend God's Kingdom throughout creation.

And these core values, needs-oriented outreach & kingdom-building stewardship, they're actualized, made real, in so many things that so many of us don't see or forget too quickly. We've become a bright spot, a landmark, for our part of Columbus. Hundreds of people a month come through our grounds for all sorts of reasons: for food, for healing, for care and support, to have their needs met in a safe place, to worship God. More than ever, more than this time last year, than the year before that or the one before that, we have become a place of provision, where God's Kingdom is manifested in the lives of people. And our work goes out past us; the leadership we provide in organizing and gathering resources around the needs of our community has earned us a reputation that all the cash tossed at all the best marketing companies in Columbus couldn't buy us.

You have a reputation that cannot be bought; it can only be

lost. So we steward it, our power, our influence, our resources, knowing that this is a treasure to be treasured, a gift to be enjoyed as we honor its giver.

Yesterday at this thing I was picking up fliers off a table from CRIS--Community Refugee & Immigration Services, one of the best refugee and immigrant service providers in Columbus, and I asked if I could take a stack for our church, and we talked, and I said, I was a part of Smoky Row Brethren Church, and he said, "Oh. I've heard of you. You do good things. Take more!" He might have been lying. We had that weird, "Where do I know you from" thing happen that made it feel like we should be friends who don't lie to each other. Lying or not: I don't care. It felt great, because it was a really handy sermon illustration for the reputation you have that God has provided for you.

God has built us in this way so fully that it's just, it's just casually real, you know? On Sunday I talked with Samuel, the West Side Assembly pastor, who was excited about volunteering at the Free Clinic this past Tuesday, and earlier on that day, I took a call from a woman who was wondering when it happened so she could come, and was delighted it was that night. I got a call from the Family Mentor Foundation, who we helped stuff all those Buddy Bags with, about dropping off a bunch of peanut butter she couldn't use for the pantry. I sent a casual email to Lord of Life, and they're going to rally around the High School students present in our pantry

population, to help provide for their supplies. We're going to provide more space to the German Language Playgroup; their leader wrote to me, "the families and I are grateful...for the chance to participate in the SRBC community."

We have to be, too. I could share more things that happened that just, were casual expressions of partnership, of providing for people, of being like Jesus to those who need touched by God. These things weren't arranged, or planned, or structured, they weren't weird, or unusual, or work at all. It's just stuff that happened this past week. Casually, like Jesus casually walked on water. Just things; but miraculous ones, gifted to us because we've been, simply, ourselves for a long time in the same place. We've been trustworthy and faithful in small things, and God has offered us larger things to care for, and a wider sphere of influence. This is mercy. And God doesn't ask us to do more, impact more, be more like Jesus farther out; God asks us simply to stay the course, and see what he does.

And we can expect that next year we'll feed more people than this year, we'll provide more practical expressions of grace-- school supplies and Christmas presents and meals and oil changes and all of it--we'll have more going on in this building, and do more outside it, by degrees, incrementally and more excellently each iteration, sometimes casually, sometimes with great, hassle-filled planning.

But yet: we are small.

Being Small:

We're small as a community, as a group of those who identify themselves as part of Smoky Row Brethren Church, and we're even smaller when it comes to those of us who might be here any given Sunday morning.

We can talk about this in all sorts of ways. I could be a cheerleader, talk about how we're small but mighty, like a really fierce chipmunk or something. That'd be good right? We need to hear it, because it's true.

We're no smaller than any congregation in the New Testament.

We're just about the size of the median congregation in our denomination, which is 53, which is just about us exactly, when you gather up all those who think of themselves as part of Smoky Row Brethren Church. And in terms of, you know, America, about half of American Christians attend a church with fewer than 100 people in it; (<https://www.barna.com/research/state-church-2016>); the median church size in America is about 75; (<http://www.worshipideas.com/what-is-an-average-sized-church/>). This means half of the churches in America are under 75. I read one large study's data set that suggested most are actually under 50 (http://www.thearda.com/ConQS/qs_295.asp).

So whatever we say about our size, the truth is that our size is pretty typical. And yet, as I've already shared, our impact out-sizes us. Our personality and influence is wildly larger than we are. But our size brings challenges with it.

Challenges: Energy

It's a challenge to sustain energy. For a worship service to feel worthwhile--and this is all about feeling, right? Not at all about the pleasure God experiences over us, or the presence God has with us--but for a worship service to feel worthwhile, you need noise, you need movement, you need the energy that comes when a roomful of people are present. The challenge here is to see things the way God sees them, and remember that when we gather together, we don't gather alone. God is with us; the Spirit among us.

Challenges: Organizing Capacity

And this speaks to another challenge our small size brings to us, which is just the challenge to organize anything at our size. Any regular event at all, from Sunday morning, to Life Groups, to Property Care Days, or special events like our Buddy Bag program or potlucks. Our capacity to populate something, no matter how good it is, is small. And no matter how much we intend to attend something, at our size any small thing can collapse that energy-building size. We have enough kiddos among us that flu and cold season can take out a quarter of the congregation, right? Late summer nights, and the loss of routine schedules, can mean that a dozen of

us aren't able to make it to this or that thing.

And the simple truth is that by and large our society doesn't organize itself around church programming. It did once, or at least, Christians did once. I mean, we're here, it's Sunday morning, we're up for that. Many of us have also committed ourselves to Life Groups, and regularly make room for those things. Just as many of us are committed to hobbies, to programming for our children, to all sorts of things that make, frankly, adding much more than we have to our church calendar kind of a foolish thing.

I was talking with someone fairly recently, who was talking about a congregation they had just joined, and they went on and on about all the great things the church did. They have youth group, and men's group, and women's group, and they have great bible studies, and mission trips, and the list was long, you know? Full of activities, but the entire list, all the things that the person I was talking to was so excited about, were oriented internally, not externally. Their excitement came from the really significant number of programs that the congregation offered. That's great. But I had deep concerns, which were entirely irrelevant, because they didn't care what I thought, because I knew that the people I was chatting with didn't have room in their own lives to take part in that much programming, and very little was going to change that. Beyond this: Does any church exist for itself, primarily, or for the world?

The truth is that in a small church our congregational capacity or organize programs is small, and our individual, family capacity to populate those programs, attend them, is just as small. We'll never have all the things to attend that other congregations may have. I think that's okay, in some real ways; what it demands, though, is ongoing communication about what does matter, what is useful, what is most relevant, and will be participated in. And because we don't live in a society that is organized around church participation as much as it's organized around work and extracurricular participation, it means that when we leave those tiny things we do participate in as a congregation, we do go out into the world as missionaries, as people who must remember: We preserve and season the world.

Challenges: Leadership Capacity

But beyond just having the challenge of populating the things we do feel are critical and important, just as challenging is our capacity to lead them.

The truth is that at our size, there is a persistent need for help just to achieve the things that we assume are most basic to congregational life, much less live up to our Core Values. Most of us offer up our gifts, our talents, our skills in some way for the congregation. And yet, the simple truth is that things go untried, or undone--pushed forward into some future time--because we just don't have enough of us to get them done,

organize them, or lead them.

And so it's always easy for any one of us to decide that what we desire is a congregation that has more internal programming, which someone else will organize for us. Has "better" or "more" whatever that lines up with what we feel are our needs. Every single small congregation faces the challenging divide, the chasm, between what the congregation wants for itself and what the congregation can provide for itself.

There's no way around this challenge; there's only believing and trusting that God will always give us the leadership capacity, the organizing capacity, and the energy to do those things that God has clearly called us to do.

Challenge: Sustainability:

In the end, the challenges that we face as a small congregation are challenges of sustainability. They're the same challenges half our local ministry partners--other churches nearby--face, challenges most of the congregations in The Brethren Church face, and I regularly talk about these challenges with other small-church pastors.

But our challenges are our own. The truth is that it is hard to sustain a small congregation. It takes a special tilt of the will, a value for people over programming, being known by others over being accommodated, having a voice over having more

opportunities than you can take. We're blessed to have the impact we have. Honestly, I have many frank conversations with pastors of small churches, and they're struggling with all the same challenges we are, without the blessing of the impact we have. For those of us who want to matter, Smoky Row offers us meaningful impact, bigger than what we ourselves could accomplish on our own.

And yet, the coming year won't minimize our challenges. Hear me, here. It will be a year of increasing impact, increasing Kingdom-Building Stewardship and Needs-Oriented Outreach, I'm certain. But our challenges will grow, too. We'll have transitions this coming year, as we've always had, as people move, as homes are built and bought and roots are laid down. As we enter into budgeting season, we'll have to consider how to do all we feel called to do with a budget that's smaller than this year's. What programming we must have, by agreement, we have to staff and organize for; that's a challenge that won't disappear, and will only grow. Our leadership capacity, our organizing capacity, our very energy will be challenged this coming year.

And yet: In the eleven years I've walked with us, pastored us, each year God has brought what we've needed when we've needed it. I won't write off our challenges or ignore them, I can't, but there's a real part of me, this deep into this journey with us that says, you know...it will work out. And Paul wasn't kidding when he said that all things work out for the good of

those who love God, who are called according to God's purposes. And all those things we measure, whatever our attendance is on any given Sunday, will I'm sure grow: the kids we help, the mouths we feed, the people we touch in advocacy, in help, in hopefulness. And God's good reputation will grow on account of our shared work. And, look, if it matters to you, your good reputation will spread to. Celebrate it.

Blessings:

And the truth is that whatever challenges we have as a congregation, or may have especially in the coming year, our size brings us blessings. Well: Our size positions us to see clearly just how in

We are more nimble than almost any congregation I know. We can act fast, respond fast, work fast, and do so in a way that leverages a lot of skill and calling and gift and partnership. But not everything that's small is nimble. Ask a newborn, you know? They won't answer, because they're terrible conversationalists. But we're small and nimble, and that's a gift from God.

We are, I think, deeply aware that God is holding this thing together. God is holding us together, holding our work together. We know the truth that every congregation tries to ignore, which is that we aren't self-sustaining; we are sustained. God works through those of us who are financial

patrons to Smoky Row and those of us who offer what little cash we can give when we can. God works through those of us who dutifully come to whatever is scheduled, and those who celebrate it as an enormous personal win if we can gather with the church once a month for something or other. God has blessed us together to make us into a blessing, and it is a special gift to realize that we aren't self-determined, self-sustaining, masters of our tidy world. We're held aloft in mercy. When you're our size, you can't pretend otherwise. Some do, probably.

And we're blessed because, frankly, you're wonderful.

You're smart. You're quirky. You're kind of nerdy. You're athletic, but not football-jock athletic, you know? Biking, Golfing, Hiking athletic. You're incredibly talented, created, and opinionated. You don't suffer fools, but are compassionate to the foolish. And although you're wise, you don't let pride shape you. You have too many pets, but deeply love people. You're smart, clever, you're creative and powerful; people of influence and responsibility and modest, but impressive skill in any area that can be named. And you stand up for those who are being broken down, and Christ stands alongside you.

You're the whole package. And it's an honor to be counted among you.

I was talking with someone whose career carried them from us to a different part of the country, and they said that they feel like they are still a part of Smoky Row, just our missionaries to their new place. Not everyone who leaves feels that way, of course; but everyone who you touch recognizes Christ is alive in us, in you all. And everything else fades in light of that true thing, which is Jesus is all the time touching people through you, whether you mean him to or not.

Conclusion:

Keep on keeping on. Be yourselves. Look to this fall and this coming year. Pray for your church. Share with me, with anyone, your great dreams and callings and how we can help realize them. Appreciate your ties, your roots, your relationships, and nurture them, even as you recognize the work it takes to face the challenges our small congregation faces. Celebrate that God uses us, because he doesn't need to, He's not obligated to. He just wants to because he thinks you're wonderful, and it brings Him pleasure to see you bless so many.

I do love you, and I could go on and on. I'll show my love by stopping. Let's be brave and good and faithful, and celebrate the power that radiates out from God through us, to our shared glory.