



Opening Devotions

2020 Virtual Michigan Annual Conference

Monday, July 27, 2020

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Hi. I'm Brad Kalajainen. Pastor Cornerstone in Grand Rapids. Beginning my 40th year in the Michigan Conference, and 30th as pastor at Cornerstone. Privilege to address the Annual Conference. Thanks to Bishop Bard for the invitation.

I'm kind of glad this is virtual today. I can't see your faces and have no idea if you tune out. I'm reminded of a time I spoke at Clark Retirement Community on a Sunday afternoon. There was one woman in the crowd who was smiling and nodding at everything I said. So I preached to her. I thought, "I have at least one person I'm connecting with." After the service she came through the line. I was wondering, "What is she going to say?" Then she said, "I'm completely deaf. Didn't hear a word you said, but you seem nice."

In these minutes, like you to think about your church. Overarching Vision of the AC is Vibrant Congregations. Our theme this year is Sowing Seeds: Rooting, Tending, and Reaping.

Came out of seminary. Assigned to Freeport UMC in the GR District at that time. 492 people in village limits. Classic. Parsonage 20 feet from the church. Colleen and I coming off 7-8 years of cafeteria food. Plant a garden.

Mentioned it the next Sunday in church, Monday, a farmer showed up with a full-size John Deere Diesel tractor and disc. People were anxious to help the new pastor. All we really wanted was a small piece of our back yard about 20 x 20 feet. Basically he set it down and picked it up and what we needed was ready to go.

Both grew up with gardens but in school so long, forgot everything. Wanted to plant broccoli. We didn't know we were supposed to buy plants, put them in hills. We bought seeds, made a row with a hoe, spread them quite liberally.

Sunday. "What did you plant?" Broccoli. "Where are the hills?" No hills. Seeds. "Haha....young, educated, "book learning" but knows nothing about gardening!"

They were dead wrong. We grew the most enviable broccoli plants Freeport had ever seen. Tall, thick, produced giant heads. No one could believe it. People would stroll over there just to admire them after church. Best moment ever. Yard backed up to the Shamrock Tavern. Back door. Alley. Picnic tables. Drunk guy (loudly)... "Whoa....I've never seen broccoli like that in my whole life!"

Anyone can plant blue ribbon broccoli with the right soil, water, and sun. In the same way, God can use ANYONE to build a VIBRANT church.

The great evangelist DL Moody once said, The world has yet to see what God can do with a person (or church) fully consecrated to Him. DL Moody. Every church can produce healthy fruit, and can make an impact for the Kingdom of God.

So how do you do that? I've been around the Michigan Conference for 39 years. I've watched a lot of churches and talked with hundreds of leaders. You are the leaders of this annual conference.

For the next few minutesI want to suggest 6 Seeds that will bear fruit if planted, nurtured, and tended over time. I want to encourage your church to pursue them relentlessly. I encourage you to write these down and discuss them at some level as you evaluate your church.

Seed #1: We must become more Conversational. People do not come to your church or mine because they already have assumptions about church.

Telephone call at the office the other day. A woman asked me questions about our church. When I explained the nature of the service, our emphasis on an "experience" on Sunday morning, and the casual dress, her response was that "she was glad it wasn't one of those churches where you get all dressed up to take a nap."

Do you hear what she was saying? She assumed church was beyond her understanding or attention span. We use secret language like "Out in the Narthex," or "Sacristy," or "Chancel," or "Collect" or "Eucharistic Table."

Being "conversational" is about use of words, but so much more. It's the way we are used to doing things. It involves our assumptions that everyone's in the know. It even involves our clothes.

When I was fresh out of seminary, I came to my first small village church, I donned my black Wesley robe and walked into the room with 20 people. Some 5 year old in the back yelled, "Hey Mom, who's the judge?"

I knew then I wasn't speaking his language. Even my clergy clothes were not Conversational. Being CONVERSATIONAL is starting with where they are, not where we are.

The early church did this so well. When Paul walked into Athens, he didn't go to the marketplace and say, "Have you ever heard of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral or Penal Substitutionary Theory of the Atonement. He did say....

“People of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way, for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: ‘To an Unknown God.’ Acts 17:22-23a (NLT)

Being CONVERSATIONAL connecting with people where they are, not where we are. Not assuming people know when to sit, stand, kneel, sing, or the secret words to the Benediction. It is being conversational in how you approach the Bible. So many preachers start with “THE TEXT FOR TODAY IS...” Do you know what an average person these days thinks of when you say TEXT?

Paul met the Greeks where they were. As a result, they opened their minds and hearts to the gospel. Our only mission is to lead people to Jesus. How “accessible” is your church to people who are not the “insiders?”

Seed #2: We must become more Invitational. I was in a large city one time walking along and I noticed this huge old stone church that must have been over a hundred years old. A majestic carved sign was above the entrance that proclaimed THE GATEWAY TO HEAVEN. (That’s good! That’s how I see the church too. Gateway to Heaven), But, on a smaller piece of paper taped to the window read, PLEASE USE OTHER ENTRANCE!

That’s often how people that are curious see our churches...as places of mixed messages. Do we really want them...or not?

Here are some alarming yet exciting statistics. 43% of United Methodists have never invited anyone to church. At the same time, 65% of unchurched people say they would accept an invitation if offered by a friend. And, 87% will stick if they come with someone they know.

Why is that? I don’t know. Maybe we are not proud of what our church offers? Maybe we just do not realize the power of invitation.

Becoming an INVITATIONAL church means even more than inviting people to worship. It means inviting people into our homes who are not believers. It also means having a church that INVITES PEOPLE TO GIVE THEIR HEARTS AND LIVES TO JESUS CHRIST.

The early church knew the value of inviting In Acts 3, Peter and John notice a lame beggar near the Temple entrance. They stop long enough to give the man their full attention. There’s some exchange of words and asking for money. But Peter gives him something better than loose change.

Then Peter said, “I don’t have money, but I’ll give you this—by the power of the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk!” Peter held out his right hand to the crippled man. As he pulled the man to his feet, suddenly power surged into his crippled feet and ankles. The man jumped up, stood there for a moment stunned, and then

began to walk around! As he went into the temple courts with Peter and John, he leapt for joy and shouted praises to God. Acts 3:5-8

I love the part where the guy goes WITH them into church. They met him where he was outside, but didn't stop there. It's so important to be alert to people who are broken, hurt, lack something, or are spiritually seeking, they are likely to respond.

Of course, your church must be able to speak to them in a CONVERSATIONAL way, and maybe have music they understand. Are your people INVITATIONAL?

Seed #3. We must become more Relational. Oh, I know what you're thinking. "We've got this one. We're very relational. We are the friendliest church around." Almost every church I have ever interviewed in the VCI process said that about themselves.

Being Relational is so much more than saying "Hi," to a new person, or swarming them after church and inviting them to lead middle school.

Being relational is more than just chit chat at coffee hour or knowing who's in the hospital. It is inviting people into our lives....being open, vulnerable, inclusive, non-anxious.

I remember a Boy Scout regional coordinator telling me a story of how a local scout troop went on a hike one day in a wooded area not far from some of the homes where some scouts lived. They were to be trained in emergency procedures in case of accidents. They chose one scout to be the "guinea pig" and lay down in the woods and pretend that he was hurt and cut badly. They took the rest of the troop over the hill to give them a quick lesson in first aid before they came back to rescue this one who was "hurt." But the leader got so into the lesson and there were so many questions he kind of forgot about the one he had left behind. Part way through the afternoon, the leader remembered and rushed back to the clearing where he had left the guinea pig scout. The boy was not there but there was a note staked to the ground that read, "Have bled to death and gone home!"

How many people have visited our churches and "bled to death and gone home" because they could not break into existing groups or cliques.

So many churches resist a network of small groups because "we already know each other," but there is no better way to develop new relationships and help people connect with Christ and others than to keep starting small groups and studying God's word. That's not only the way to grow spiritually, it is the way of the early church.

One of my favorite verses in the Bible is Acts 20:20. I think it's so cool that God saw to it that it was 20:20. Paul is leaving Ephesus and says to the church...You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. Acts 20:20

I call that God's 20/20 vision for the church. Gather for worship together, then meet house to house in smaller groups. That's relational. Church is less about business and more about caring for people's souls. How's your church doing relationally?

Seed #4 We must become more Glocal. Yes, I said, "Glocal." That's local and global. This is the mission of your church.

Is your church deeply embedded in the community....to the point that if your church closed down, would the community really care?

When Jesus left the earth, he sent the early church off to be Glocal. He said to them, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Acts 1:8. Notice the word "witnesses," and the use of the word "and."

Methodists are known to be highly organized. Man, we have committees for everything! But that doesn't always translate into mission.

I heard about a soldier who was wounded in a battle and ordered to the nearest military hospital. Arriving at the entrance, he saw two doors: one marked "For Minor Wounds," the other "For Serious Wounds." He entered the first door and walked down a long hallway. At the end of the hall, he saw two more doors. The first read "For Officers," the other "For Enlisted Personnel." The soldier went through the second door. Again, he found himself walking down a long hallway with two doors at the end. One read "Army," the other "Marines." The wounded soldier took the second door and found himself back out on the street. When he got back to his unit, his buddies asked, "How'd your trip to the hospital go?" "The people really didn't help me much," he said, "but, man, are they organized!" I would hate it if that was said about my church. How about you? A few years ago we made a commitment to become global and local in deeper ways. We did not want to be a church that just tossed a few bucks in several directions without a clear strategy and plan. We set aside part of our income every month just for outreach. We have established life-long relationships with tribal people in N. Kenya as well as a village in rural Guatemala where we currently sponsor 150 children in the village.

Locally, we committed to literacy and ending poverty and food distribution. That commitment has led us to work with 3 schools in depth with weekend food distribution, tutoring, and character-building assemblies.

One of my favorite stories from one elementary school was when a young mother of one of the kids in our character program, showed up in church one Sunday at our downtown campus. She talked to people throughout the morning and checked out all the things we did.

Near the end of the morning our pastor walked up to her to welcome her and asked her what brought her here today. Her answer... "*I just had to come to this church to see what your agenda was and why you all spend so much time at my daughters' school. I*

found out this morning, that you just love my daughter.” Does your church have what I call a GLOBAL MISSION MINDSET? Fifth..

Seed #5 We must become more Digital. I had to add this to the seeds of the church. I don't believe the threat of COVID is going to disappear quickly. Fortunately for our church, we began an online worship one year before this past March. But now we have had to rethink everything. Digital church is here to stay even if Physical church makes a return. Digital church means more than a worship service. It has to engage kids, students, small groups, classes, social media and much more. Digital church says, "We never closed. We are simply meeting in hundreds of locations. If your church has not yet PIVOTED to thinking digital in every aspect, it is getting close to too late. Last..

Seed #6: We must become more Foundational. Being Foundational means Jesus is the foundation of everything we do here. We want Jesus to be the foundation to our worship, teaching, prayer, and our care, how we understand mission.

We want Jesus to be the foundation of why we serve inside the church or reach out into the world. We want Jesus to center us on everything we do. Again, I see this in the early church. When confronted and told to Shut up, Peter said....Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to humankind by which we must be saved." Acts 4:11-12. That's our one true love. Jesus. If the motivation of your church is based on anything else, it will be like planting a garden on hard clay. You might get a little growth, but there's nothing there in the long run to sustain you.

Back in 2005 Hurricane Katrina devastated the south all around New Orleans. For those of you who do not remember this moment, many people lost their homes. They tried to use the Superdome, home of the Saints, to house people and it was a disaster. People were literally resettled in many cities across the nation. Imagine having to uproot and start over! It would have been easy to lose hope.

Reverend Michael Mille pastored one of those churches, the White Dove Fellowship International Outreach Center. In the weeks after the storm, he preached to 300 people rather than the 3,000 that were previously in attendance.

During an emotional sermon, Reverend Mille offered a perspective on the tragedy that RESTED IN HOPE over despair. He could have been angry and discouraged that his church was literally gone. Instead, he let hope give him a new perspective. He got up the first Sunday back, looked at those 300 and said, *We have successfully planted people all over the U.S."* He also noted, *"We used to sing Jesus is all we need...now Jesus is all we've got.*

Pre-corona, post-corona or somewhere in between, JESUS IS ALL WE GOT. Which one or more of these seeds does your church need to focus on first?

Let's pray.... (prayer)