

## **Why We Do What We Do - Flagship Ministries of the Church**

Let's Listen Series Sermon 3

Acts 16:9-10

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In 1988 I was hired as the Minister of Youth at Hartwell First Baptist Church. Wow! That means next year I will celebrate 30 years of full time service in the local church.

Dr. Hugh Kirby, the church's pastor, traveled to Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky and interviewed several of us that were about to graduate. Tina and I were fortunate that Dr. Kirby chose me to work with him.

Tina and I were flown to Atlanta. Then we were driven to Hartwell to meet the committee and be introduced to the church family.

When we were given a tour of the church facilities, one of the stops we made was the church gymnasium. On the wall of the gymnasium were all the championship banners their teams had won in the State Royal Ambassador's basketball tournament.

It was like seeing banners of the Boston Celtics or Chicago Bulls. It was obvious that First Baptist Church was the dominant team.

I soon discovered that even small country churches in Hart County had gymnasiums. What was more, I also learned I was expected to put together league play for all eight churches. This league of churches was more like a small recreation department program.

We added several more banners to the gymnasium wall but years later the state R.A. Basketball championship was discontinued. The organizer told me that there was too much emphasis on winning and not enough on sportsmanship, which didn't surprise me.

On a more positive note, the R.A. basketball program at First Baptist Church was well-known in the Hartwell community for many years. When you mentioned FBC, everyone knew about the R.A. basketball program. There might have even been a little "recruiting" taking place, in the name of Jesus and winning souls, of course.

The church was also known for its music ministry. Barbara Johnson led a strong and robust choir. Her husband was the band director at the high school and he led a multi-octave hand bell choir.

The church had a rich history for liturgical worship and for choosing pastors strong in pastoral care. My affinity for wearing a robe in traditional worship can be traced back to my time at First Baptist Church Hartwell.

While they have now strayed from these liturgical roots that were laid by Dr. Kent Anglin back in the 1970's, this kind of worship seeped into my soul and has never left.

Before Tina and I left, the middle school and high school youth ministries were strong again. Charlie Wilson took over and continued to build the program over the next decade.

Strong, well-known church programs are sometimes called flagship ministries.

These are the lead ministries of a church. These are ministries that a church does really well.

Another way to think about a flagship ministry is like this: When someone outside of this church hears about First Baptist Church Jefferson, what does he or she think about?

I'm going to pause for ten seconds for you to ponder that question. What do you think are the flagship ministries of First Baptist Church Jefferson?

Perhaps you thought about our Foodbank, the Turkey Can Run, weekday pre-school, or the passion we have for missions as a church.

Perhaps an even greater question to ask of any ministry or any program is the why question?

Why do we do any program or ministry?

Truthfully, a lot of churches have programs just to attract people.

It's not unusual for someone to ask, "What programs does your church offer for children? What kinds of programs do you offer for teenagers? What kinds of programs do you have for senior adults?"

This is the way a lot of people look for a church. People shop for a church like they shop for a market or a community to live. Does it have good schools, a YMCA or Recreation Department? People are consumers. People will shop around until they find a church with the best programs and that is one of the deciding factors in choosing a church for many people. These days, theology rarely comes into the decision. It has more to do with whether the children and teenagers are having fun and staying busy. Did they make friends? Do they want to go back?

We can hope they will also discover some spiritual depth, but that's not always the case.

This isn't going to change. Every church wants to have successful programs. Church members usually define success by whether the numbers are good, but just because a church has successful programs that does not mean the church is successful by God's standards.

Let me explain.

We need to remember that our main purpose is to make disciples, to baptize, to teach, to worship, and to build community.

How do you know which programs to offer?

Should we have an after-school tutoring program? Should we have a program to help people find work? Should we offer a technology camp during the summer? On another note, can't you have too many programs? We have only so many volunteers and so much money.

This is the reason we need to imagine where God wants us to go and what it is God wants us to do. When we decide this, we need to think about how God wants us to get there.

As good stewards, we want to make the most of our resources and whatever we do, we want to do it with quality and with excellence.

“Whatever you do, work at it with your whole being, for the Lord and not for men, for you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as your reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.” (Colossians 3:23-24)

We should always ask questions like these: “Why are we doing this? Why is this worth our time? Why is this worth our money?”

“Because we have always done it,” is not the right answer.

“Because it is tradition,” is not the right answer.

“Because if we didn't do it, it would upset someone,” is not the right answer.

Every church should have a clear understanding of why we are here and what it is we are trying to accomplish. We have limited resources both in people power and in finances. Those resources should be used wisely.

If we are not using them to accomplish our main reason for being here, this can't be pleasing to God.

In 2014, a major pharmaceutical company announced that they would stop selling tobacco products. The decision cost the company an estimated 2 billion dollars a year in sales. (<https://cvshealth.com/newsroom/press-releases/cvs-caremark-stop-selling-tobacco-all-cvspharmacy-locations>)

When you look at the company's purpose statement, you understand why they did this. Their purpose is to help people on their path to better health. While they must make money to survive, that's not their main purpose. Otherwise, they would sell many other items that have nothing to do with better health.

If our purpose is to baptize people by any means possible, then we could tell people we would pay them to come to church and even pay them to get baptized. Our baptisms might go up, but that would make baptism meaningless. So it's not just about numbers, is it?

If it had just been about large crowds, Jesus would have stayed longer when people gathered and cared little about talking to people one on one.

Someone at the pharmaceutical company had to look out into their future and say, "Selling tobacco products will no longer be a part of our future story."

We have to do the same thing. We have to decide if we are doing some things that maybe used to have a place here but perhaps it's time to graduate them to create some space for some more effective ways to reach people.

We all want results from our labors.

One of the lessons from the Parable of the Talents is that God expects a return from the investment He has placed in us.

God has gifted us. This church has monetary gifts. We have people with great wisdom. We have the gift of being in a great location. We have the people who are very talented. God expects a return.

I am very pleased that conversation about writing our future story stirred up the "why question" among the parents of our teenagers.

Some were asking, "Why are we writing a future story when my teenager needs some help today? Why are we talking about the future when we need to talk about next month. We need some encouragement now."

Parents of middle school and high school youth met with our Deacon Chair Kristy Eubanks to compile a list of ideas and suggestions of how ministry to their teens and the friends of their teens and pre-teens could be strengthened. Kristy then met with Justin and with me. Teenagers met with Fred Gurley.

It was a very healthy process. We are already seeing fruit from those meetings. Justin was affirmed, challenged, and encouraged.

I am asking all of you to have this kind of interest in the immediate future, the next six months, next year, the next five and ten years of our church and involve yourself in some way.

When we talk about the future story of our church, it includes next month, and next year. We are talking about five years ten years from now. No changes short-term or long-term will be made if we don't listen to God and to each other. This was beautifully modeled by parents of our middle and high school youth.

New prayer groups are still being formed. If you are not in a prayer group you can still form one with two other people. If that doesn't appeal to you, we will still provide a prayer manual and you can pray on your own. You can also access the prayer manual from our church website.

We want to lay a strong foundation so next year we will have the best chance of dreaming together and writing a future story that will serve as a guide for us as we journey together.

Let me remind you, there is no magic bullet to church growth, but for every church that grows, the same Holy Spirit provides the power for the church to "Soar with Faith."

God wants this church to think inside and outside the box. He wants us to demonstrate our desire to follow Him and be faithful.

God wants us to follow Him to the place where He already is. God is already in the future. He is bidding us to come and follow him into it. He is there, like he was in Paul's dream. Paul saw someone inviting him to come over into Macedonia and preach the gospel.

Macedonia is in modern-day Europe. No one had ever been there to preach the Gospel. When Paul awoke from his sleep, he believed the dream was inspired of God.

Why should Paul leave what he was doing to go to a place he'd never been to preach to people he'd never met? Because God led him there!

If God gave you a dream like that, would you pursue it?

If you have been here longer than ten years, you were greatly disappointed when you were challenged to dream big and the dream of a new worship center didn't happen.

The difference for us now is that we are focusing on relationships. Sure, God can bless a building, and God still might, but "go build" does not come before his commandments to "go disciple" or to "go teach," or to "love one another."

Vision and relationships must be driving our future story or we will end up a long way from where Jesus is currently standing.

How do we get to where Jesus is?

- 1) We have begun by praying. God will honor our prayers and God will draw close to us as we seek His will.
- 2) Let's visualize what our future ministry looks like. We should ask, "Why are we doing what we are doing? What programs need keeping? Which ones need an overhaul? What do we need to do make the ones we have excellent? How can you use your gifts to help make that happen? Are there any programs we need to graduate?"
- 3) Let's listen to each other. Remember, we are best when we are not trying to push through our personal agendas but when we are willing to listen to the agendas of others. This helps make us a community that cares for each other.

4) Let's listen to the community. Let's find out what needs people have that are not being met by our churches. Let's find out how we can minister to those outside our church.

The people in Macedonia were in need of someone to preach the gospel to them.

Paul listened to God through a dream. He ended up going to modern-day Europe, the first missionary to go there. If we listen to God, what new places might we go? What new ministries might we create?

What might you do that is out of your comfort zone? What ministry might you become involved in because God has impressed upon you that He wants you to be a part of His work?

Remember, the Lord is already in tomorrow. He is in next year. He knows what is ahead five years from now. He's calling us to come on over to where He is. The question is, "Do you want to go to where the Lord is, or do you want to stay right where we are?"

That's a question we answer every day. When we refuse to go where God asks us to go, ministry goes undone. People go un-ministered to. Lives go untouched. We do not reach our full potential as a person or as a church.

It is true that when we go where Jesus is, there is sacrifice, but there is also joy. There is life. We find the reason we were made.

Prayer: God of the future, as you call us to where you are, help us to always know you as the God of the present, having an unmistakable assurance of your presence. For if we know you are with us now, we can have the assurance that your promise will be true that you will be with us always, even until the end of the age. Show us as individuals where our next steps should be. Show us as a church what our future holds and what bold steps you want us to take to meet you for the sake of loving others into your kingdom. Amen.