

**First Presbyterian Church, Sylacauga, AL
The Rev. James B. Stanford III
November 15, 2009**

Hebrews 10:35 – 11:3

(There's a lot that we need to hear in today's lesson from Hebrews, so I'm going to use this text both this week and next ... and make this a two-part sermon.)

"On the Road Again: Going Forward"

One Sunday afternoon, the pastor of the largest Presbyterian Church in Houston, TX, and his wife were on their way to a reception. Since they were running late, he was driving too fast, and soon heard a siren behind him. He pulled off to the side of the road, and when the officer arrived at his window, the officer said, "Are you familiar with the speed limit in this area?" "Yes, I am," the pastor replied, "it's 30 miles per hour."

The policeman asked to see his driver's license, so the pastor pulled out his driver's license, as well as the insurance card for the car. Since the car was leased for him by his church, the owner's name on the insurance certificate was Grace Presbyterian Church. Seeing this, the officer asked, "What do you do for a living?" "Well, normally, I'm delighted to answer that question. But right now, I'm embarrassed to say that I'm the pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church."

The policeman looked at him and said, "Reverend, there must be a parable here somewhere." "I'm sure there is," the pastor replied. And that's when the officer suggested: "How about --- we can't have the shepherd outrunning the flock?"

A pastor and a church need to stay together. So, this morning, I'm going to ask that you join me on this journey and not get left behind, because it's time for us to get back "on the road again". Now, when I say that, I feel like Willie Nelson whose signature song is:

**On the road again –
Just can't wait to get on the road again –
The life I love is making music with my friends
And I can't wait to get on the road again.**

In the summer of 2007 about thirty of us took part in an extensive survey, called Natural Church Development. The questionnaires we filled out were sent to the NCD national office, as the first step in the process to help us get a fix on our congregation ... to identify areas of strengths ... and to note areas for growth.

As Natural Church Development, which I will refer to as NCD, was the brainchild of Christian Schwarz, who believed there might exist universal, scientifically verifiable principles of church growth that apply to all churches. What he discovered was that, regardless of size, location, denomination or theology, all growing, flourishing churches share eight quality characteristics.

Rather than “growth promises,” please note that these eight factors are more signs of a church’s health. For each of these factors, qualitative goals need to be set ... pursued ... and measured. While no one factor by itself leads to growth or health, through the interplay of these eight factors the preparation is done for God’s Holy Spirit to be at work.

They are listed on the front of your bulletin. Let’s read them together, aloud, along with their definitions.

1. **Empowering Leadership:** Leaders who equip, support, motivate and mentor others to become all that God wants them to be.
2. **Gift-oriented Ministry:** Individuals who identify their gifts and integrate them into ministries that match their gifts.
3. **Passionate Spirituality:** Faith lived out with commitment, fire and enthusiasm.
4. **Functional Structures:** Forms and structures in the church that fulfill their purpose.
5. **Inspiring Worship Services:** Worship that feeds, grounds and inspires those who attend.
6. **Holistic Small Groups:** Small groups in which individual Christians can find intimate community, practical help and intensive spiritual interaction.
7. **Need-Oriented Evangelism:** Sharing the gospel in ways that meet the questions and needs of those outside the church.
8. **Loving Relationships:** Genuine concern, practical care, and authentic enjoyment of one another.

Now, get a pencil and pen and keep it handy.

What we learned in August of 2007 is that we do the best job here at First Presbyterian with Holistic Small Groups and Loving Relationships. So take your pencil or pen and put two stars beside Holistic Small Groups and one star beside Loving Relationships.

Keep your pen or pencil handy. I want you to put three check marks beside the characteristic that we felt needed the most attention: Need-oriented

Evangelism. This is referred to as our **“minimum factor”**. The next was **Inspiring Worship Services**, so put two checks beside it, and finally one check beside **Functional Structures**. Keep your pencil or pen handy; you’ll need it again in a moment.

Remember! To focus on the **“minimum factor”** doesn’t mean ignoring the other seven areas. Christian Schwarz said that the key is for a church to use what it’s good at, in our case **Holistic Small Groups** and **Loving Relationships** to enhance what needs more attention. What we are really talking about is a process of growth to achieve healthiness as a congregation.

The effort in NCD is to raise the quality of the area in which a church is weakest ... its **minimum factor**. Most churches have a weakness that they tend to ignore. For instance, if a church’s minimum factor is loving relationships, yet the church is good in prayer, then they tend to go on with prayer. But they also need to direct more spiritual energy into loving relationships.

It’s like a human body. If you have problems with your heart and need surgery, the doctor cannot say, “Well, you have a nice voice. Focus on your singing.” No, you need heart surgery first. Then you can build on your strengths.

I have been reading what other churches had done, and one of the things I noticed was how much focus was spent on weaknesses ... on criticisms. Now, these are real, and they may be legitimate. However, that’s a lot of negative energy expended in just voicing such negatives comments. One church had two lists. Their minimum factor was inspiring worship. One list had 32 strengths, while the other had three times as many weaknesses.

This morning, I would ask you to focus on the strengths of our church, so take your pencil and pen and look at the bulletin insert. On the left are some suggested positives at First Presbyterian. If you agree with any of them, put a check by them. But even more significant would be for you to list two or three specifics positives that you feel good about.

I chose to put a prayer at the top that I think should come into play: Keeping God close and keeping negative comments to the minimum: **“Lord, keep your arm around my shoulder ... and your hand over my mouth!”** Can you tell that your pastor believes in that old saying: “Lord, fill my mouth with worthwhile stuff ... and nudge me when I’ve said enough!”

Ultimately, what Christian Schwarz is really talking about is availing ourselves of the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit ... or at least getting out of the way long enough for the church to grow. Because that’s what healthy organisms do. They live, grow, and reproduce themselves. That’s how God

wired all of life. NCD's principles are based on nature ... on how God makes things grow.

In a cross section of growing grass you've got your dirt ... and your roots ... and your worms wandering around in the soil making it richer. And then there are the pale green blades of grass poking through to the sun. So how does that grass grow? Does it have a plan ... a strategy? Will it make itself grow eight inches by the end of the summer? Can you measure the blades, pull them up and then stick them some place else and expect the same growth? No. By faith we know that what is seen is made from things that are not seen. (Hebrews 11:3) We provide the conditions: the seed, the soil, the water, access to the sun. However, that grass will grow all by itself.

Clint Collins is our professional farmer. Jesus talked about Clint in Mark 4. He said that the kingdom of God is like Clint planting seeds in the ground; and going to bed at night and getting up by day, and the seed sprouts up and grows -- - how, Clint himself does not know. The earth produces crops by itself," says Jesus, "first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head." (Mark 4:26-29)

What a sweet deal: like Clint with his crop, we provide the conditions for growth; God produces the growth itself. Only, we must provide the right conditions for growth.

NCD helps us look beneath the surface of our congregation's life to examine its conditions for growth --- how is the soil of our spiritual discipline? The seed of our worship? The roots of our relationships? The water of our mission? The tender, pressing blade of our evangelism? And what might we do to enhance those conditions for growth?

Ah, but the growth itself ... now, that's God's job. Schwarz says, "The strategic secret of growing churches is the release of God's growth forces? Embedded within its principles is a deep, deep trust in God's love for us ... in God's work of redemption through Christ Jesus ... and in the astonishing and independent power of the Holy Spirit to spark new life where ever it blows. Schwarz called it Natural Church Development because it is "natural" ... it is based on nature ... on how life works.

Look at the front of your bulletin again: The secret strength of those eight characteristics doesn't lie in the nouns, like leadership, structures, groups, etc. No, it is in the adjectives that precede them: empowering, effective, holistic. The nouns --- ministry, spirituality, evangelism --- they all exist in one form or another in every church. It's the adjectives --- gift-based, passionate, need-oriented --- that's what makes the qualitative difference in a healthy church.

You and I can't make First Presbyterian nor any other organism grow, but we can examine and improve the conditions for growth. You and I cannot make First Presbyterian flourish, but each of us can do our part to provide the best possible conditions for the harvest to come.

According to our scripture today from Hebrews, confidence brings a great reward ... and endurance brings what was promised. What Jesus promised was life, and life abundant (John 10:10). We can be confident that Jesus will do His part. Time will tell whether we'll do ours.

In 2007 we determined that we should focus our energy and attention on "need-oriented evangelism" as a priority for the next year-and-a-half to two years. If you do the math, you'll realize that time is up, so it seems fitting for us to take stock of where we've been and think about what lies ahead.

I'm going to close this morning with Paul's words from Ephesians 4:1-4, but I'm going to read from THE MESSAGE, because Eugene Peterson has a unique way of expressing it. Here's how it reads, and I'm quoting: "In light of all this, here's what I want you to do ... I want you to get out there and walk --- better yet, run! --- on the road God called you to travel. I don't want you sitting around on your hands. I don't want anyone strolling off, down some path that goes nowhere ... You are all called to travel the same road and in the same direction, so stay together, both outwardly and inwardly."

Resources

Erin Dunigan, "Natural Church Growth: Schwarz Book Helps Churches Focus and Change," PRESSING NEWS of The Presbytery of Western Colorado, January-February, 2008.

Jill Oglesby Evans, "Going Forward – A Summary of Natural Church Development," Emory Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA, November 12, 2006.

First Presbyterian Church of San Pedro, Mission Assessment Report, October, 2002.

Willie Nelson, "On the Road Again"

Christian A. Schwarz, NATURAL CHURCH DEVELOPMENT: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches, ChurchSmart Resources, 2006.

Christian A. Schwarz, "The Strong Little Church: An Interview with Christian A. Schwarz," faithsite.com, 2000.

The Ascension Sanctuary, Natural Church Development, 2005-2008