

Dare to Dream

Sterling UMC
October 16, 2011
Philippians 3:10-14

Once upon a time there was a great nest that sat high atop a mountain ledge overlooking a beautiful valley below. In the nest were several eggs. Soon the eggs hatched and a flock of beautiful baby chicks emerged. But these were no ordinary chicks: they were eaglets. As their mother fed them they began to grow. Soon they were able to stand and before long they began to stretch their wings. Then that momentous day came when their mother pushed them out of the nest and low and behold they were flying. Short, low altitude at first, but then higher and higher until they were soaring. The feeling was exhilarating. The view was breathtaking. They were doing what they were meant to do.

One day as one of the baby eaglets was soaring high in the sky he noticed something in the valley below. He dove down to get a better look. What he saw intrigued him. There in the valley was another flock of birds. These birds didn't look like him, but they seemed to have a very interesting lifestyle. They spent their days sitting around in the meadow enjoying one another's company and nibbling on food that was provided for them. The baby eagle found this place comfortable, so he stayed awhile. He talked and he ate and he talked and he ate. He was safe, comfortable and contented. Several days went by, then a week, then a month, then a year. Pretty soon he was one of the flock scratching and clawing in the dirt, squawking and pecking at the others, he had become a completely different bird.

One day one of his brothers came down to see him. "Who are you?" the eaglet asked. "Who am I? Who are you?" came his brother's reply. "You've been down here for so long that you think you're a chicken, but look at me. Look at my face. You're not a chicken. You're an eagle. You were not meant to sit, you were meant to soar."

"You're right," he said. But when he tried to stretch his mighty wings they wouldn't work. He had gotten so fat from feeding himself, and his wings had gotten so weak from the lack of use that when he tried to fly he couldn't get off the ground.

Folks I believe this story is a parable that in many ways describes the modern church. God has created us to soar like the eagle. He has given us resources to soar, to attain spiritual heights as the eagle attains physical heights. Yet when we look around us it is glaringly obvious that many Christians and many churches have become chickens.

We lose our focus. Our passion begins to wane. We forget our mission. We grow content and comfortable with who we are and lose our vision for what God wants us to become. We become too much about getting fed and too little about exercising our faith.

What about us? Where are we? Are we any different here at Sterling?

I would like to take a serious look at our church this morning. 136 years ago God wanted to begin a good work in this community. And thanks be to God there were men and women who heard and answered God's call to build a church. A place where people in this community could come to find His presence, where they could be

challenged with God's Word, where they could find comfort and strength in times trial and weakness, where they could be trained and equipped to be witnesses in the world around them, and where they could enjoy the encouragement and support of Christian fellowship.

We give thanks today for all who have gone before us. That faithful cloud of witnesses that surrounds us as we live our life and run the race that is marked out before us. Those who gave of themselves in humble service to this church. We thank God for allowing the paths of our lives to cross. And we continue to draw inspiration and strength from them that enables us to live our lives to their fullest.

We give thanks for everyone who has stood behind this pulpit and faithfully proclaimed the love of Jesus Christ through God's Holy Word. Tommy Markham, Sam Espinoza, Jim Snow, Alan Reifsnnyder, Lee Crosby, Ralph Goodman, to name just a few from recent years. As a pastor, I stand here today in a line of those who have, with God's help, faithfully served this congregation, not only through preaching, but also through loving and caring for you in both the good times and bad times. And I am sure that I speak for every man who has been where I am today when I say what a privilege it is to serve you.

I believe that over the course of the last several years we have made some amazing strides as we sought to be faithful and to grow as a body of believers. There are several ways in particular that I want to highlight.

I believe that we have grown deeper in our spiritual commitment to Jesus Christ. There is a depth of spiritual commitment and maturity now that was not here before. We have more people who dedicate themselves to the spiritual disciplines of prayer, Scripture study, and intentional discipleship. This is evident in the increased number of people involved in small group Bible studies. But it is also evident in your attitudes and actions and is demonstrated through more people giving themselves to faithful attendance in worship as well as strong and growing stewardship of your resources of time and treasure.

I am very proud of the way that we have grown in our ministry to children and youth. If you show up on a Sunday night you will witness the incredible energy and excitement of our LifeSigns youth ministry. Over the course of the last seven last seven years our young people have grown not only in numbers but in spirit, commitment, and leadership, involving and investing themselves in ministry and service to the community and world. Our WoRM Sunday school, VBS, LifeSigns Jr. all provide our children fun and engaging ways to learn about and encounter the love of Jesus.

We have also changed the structure of our church and by so doing we have changed the culture. We have moved from a more administratively driven church to a ministry driven church, centering our structure around the 5 key areas of ministry, worship, fellowship, discipleship, missions, and evangelism.

The area that I have seen the most growth is in our commitment and involvement in missions and outreach. Our mission trip participation and support has grown from one mission team 7 years ago to this year 6 teams with nearly 100 people out in the mission fields and countless others here at home supporting their efforts in prayer and through donations and financial contributions. Our local outreach efforts have evolved from merely collecting items or writing checks to support local missions and charities to

countless members going out into our own backyard and serving the needs people through Habitat, Backpack Buddies, tutoring, and a myriad of other ministries.

One year ago we also stepped out in faith and launched a new and exciting ministry to our Hispanic and Latino neighbors. It has been impressive to me to see how God has changed the hearts and attitudes of our people. My heart has been warmed by the way the efforts of Luz and others have begun to bear fruit and draw our H/L brothers and sisters into the life of our church family.

There are so many things for us to celebrate and to feel good about. They bear witness to the Spirit's presence in our midst.

Over the course of the last several weeks in this message series I have sought to share with you my vision and dream for our church for the years to come. I have spoken to you about my dream to see every person in this congregation involved in some sort of ministry, to join the dream team. Phil challenged us to seek even more concrete ways to involve ourselves in both local and global outreach and missions. And last week I shared with you my dream that we all aspire to radical discipleship, to get involved or more deeply committed to being involved in sort of Bible study or small group.

This morning as I close this series I want to challenge you one more time to dare to dream. The area that I want to speak to about is our facility. I believe that the bricks and mortar of this facility are tools that God has given us to accomplish His mission. While it is true that the church is not this building where we are sitting this morning, it is the people that are the church, this building is a magnificent resource that enables us to do His work in the world. If something happened tomorrow and this building was gone, Sterling UMC would not cease to exist. But our ability to do what he calls us to do would be seriously damaged.

Are you aware of how we got to where we are today? In the late 1970's our congregation was worshiping at the small white church on West Church Road.. The congregation had been worshiping in that church since 1898 when that facility had been built to replace a previous building that was lost in a fire. Some forward thinking leaders identified the need to look into the future and dared to dream and envision expansion beyond what the old church building could accommodate. A decision was made to build a new modern church building on our current property. In 1983 construction was completed on the 2-story wing of our current church building. In short order the congregation outgrew that space, and the need for a second construction phase was determined. In 1992 the church again dared to dream and a second ambitious building project was completed including our current sanctuary and our classroom wing surrounding the church courtyard.

By the late 1990's, Sterling was a booming suburb, and the congregation was continuing to thrive. The need for another expansion became evident. During this time our church dared to dream and plans for an expansion to the rear of our current building were drawn. This expansion was to include a family life center with a large fellowship hall/multipurpose room, a large kitchen, and numerous additional classrooms.

Before work could begin on that addition, our beloved pastor Jim Snow was diagnosed with terminal cancer. A period followed when our congregation went into a time of grieving. Church membership declined, budgets were tight, and the expansion was tabled indefinitely. During this time we were continuing to pay off the loan for the

1992 addition, and many needed maintenance and repair needs had to be deferred. In 2006, the Board of Trustees identified the need to invest in significant repairs, renovations and improvements to get our facility back up to par. The needs identified at that time were well beyond what our budget could support, and the discussion of a new capital campaign was launched again.

The Visioning Committee was reconvened in 2006 to consider among other things our current facility needs and the potential need for future expansion to accommodate future ministry directions. After all the established groups and committees of the church were consulted a list of 16 primary "pinch points" that our congregation currently faces or that hinder our growth was established. In 2008, we hired an architect to help us envision ways to address these 16 points within our current building footprint, and if need be, beyond our current walls. Then the economic downturn hit, and the process was again temporarily put on hold.

In 2010, our Administrative Council once again dared to dream and voted to proceed with a capital project. However, it was recognized that we had not yet had the opportunity to vet our plans with the congregation. Hence, the Sterling Bucks Exercises coordinated by the Visioning Committee were born. The participation in the Sterling Bucks Exercises was phenomenal (87% of the bucks that were handed out were returned to us in the bags.)

After thorough review of the Sterling Bucks exercises, consultation with the county, architects, engineers, and church leaders, the Visioning Committee arrived at a recommendation for our expansion/renovation project.

At the March 22 Administrative Council meeting, the Visioning Committee recommended to the council the adoption of a design concept similar to what was proposed by Rev. Snow and the church leadership in 1999, with some modifications to address our current and anticipated ministry needs. This design concept addresses nearly all of the areas identified in the Sterling Bucks, with emphasis on those items that scored highest (kitchen, bathrooms, fellowship hall, Sanctuary upgrades, storage, etc.) With the Administrative Council's approval a thorough process was completed to select an architect to enable us to move forward to 1.) help us establish reliable cost estimates for the project, and 2.) develop some renderings we can present to the congregation.

The ultimate scope of any project will be contingent on our Finance Committee and a Capital Campaign Committee being confident that the financial scope of the project is within reach of our congregation's ability to support it, and that it will not adversely impact the operation and ministries of the church. A preferred architectural firm has now been selected and Administrative Council accepted the recommendation. We are awaiting approval of funding to engage their services. There are still many questions to be answered and details to iron out as we continue this process. Once some further questions are answered and funding is secured and approved, a conceptual design process will commence. This design process will incorporate all of the many needs expressed in the Sterling Bucks exercises and in the visioning processes of the past five years. A design will take shape that will meet our current and future needs. This is a bold and visionary step. So I ask you do you dare to dream?

As we dare to dream about the possibility of expansion several questions immediately arise.

Is it being considered for the right reasons? There are many reasons that could be offered for the expansion or the renovation of a church facility. Some would use the Field of Dreams philosophy; "If you build it they will come." This is the belief that a new or renovated building will automatically attract new people to come. While there may be some curiosity from the community when a new building is built, if that is the motivation for seeking to build, it will fail. Some would say build when you need something to get the congregation stirred up and to generate some new excitement. Again that is a ridiculous assumption and a terrible reason to enter into something as costly as a building campaign can be.

The right reason is when the proposed renovation or expansion is a necessary project that facilitates ministry. If it enables and promotes and supports an enhanced opportunity to do ministry then it is right. And that is exactly what this project does. It aligns the facility needs with the ministry priorities expressed in both the church's vision and both of the Sterling Bucks exercises.

A second question that must be asked is, "Are there other options?" In other words is the current space and facility being utilized to its fullest potential? Is there any way that the ministry can be accomplished within the current building? For us for example one of the most pressing needs that have been identified by the Visioning Committee and overwhelmingly confirmed by you the congregation in the Sterling Bucks exercise was the need for a space where the entire congregation could gather for a meal, or where our children and youth could gather to fellowship and have recreational time, or where we could host a large community outreach event such as a food and clothing distribution. Obviously Gallihugh Hall is insufficient. Well there is another option within our current building footprint. This room we are sitting in would be large enough for those types of activities and events. We could remove all of the pews, level the floor and turn this room into truly a multipurpose space using it both for worship and these other types of events and activities. After all it is really the most under utilized space in that it is used primarily 3 hours a week for worship. But I'm willing to venture a guess that if that were even seriously mentioned we would have mass revolt.

A third question is can it be funded and paid for without hurting ministry? Obviously that is a huge question that won't fully be able to be answered until the scope of the project is finally determined, a cost estimate is obtained, and a Capital Campaign Committee is seated to study the financial ramifications.

These and other questions will continue to be explored and answered in the weeks and months to come. But I want to close by posing to you a question that I raised several weeks ago at the beginning of this series. Are we visionary or are we stationary? I believe that God is calling us to celebrate what he has done and where we have traveled, but that he is daring us to dream, to move onward and upward. I believe if our dream is too small then our God is too small.

When I was a boy, my family took several vacations in the mountains. I remember one place in particular that had a path that you could climb that would take you to the top of the mountain where there was a beautiful scenic overlook. Along the path there were many resting places. I remember that often people would stop to rest and renew their strength before continuing their climb to the summit.

I remember watching with great amazement as climbers would look upward to the top of the mountain and then decide to climb no higher. They felt content to sit and

wait while their family and friends continued the climb. Instead of seeking renewal and then continuing their climb, they decided to stay and camp. Instead of taking the initiative to go higher, they rested at the level they had achieved. Instead of pressing on toward the beauty and majesty of the summit, they settled into the “chicken coup.”

We too, can choose to be numbered with the many who have decided that the price is too great, the sacrifice too demanding, and the benefits of climbing too small. We can choose to sit. We can watch others climb. There will always be the offer of a seat for anyone who is tired, plus sympathy and 17 reasons why it is not necessary to climb higher. Words of discouragement are contagious. And there are always more at the bottom than at the top.

But I for one am not content with that. The mission of the church is too important. The stakes are too high. We must dare to dream! We must move onward and upward. We must press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Jesus Christ.

My friends the challenge is before us. It is no easy task. But you know what? It is worth it! We are building his church. God has placed before us a magnificent future. There is so much potential in this congregation that it is not even funny. He has so many things for us to accomplish. So many ways that God wants to use us to make a difference in this community and this world. We cannot afford to be idle. We cannot afford to simply maintain the status quo. We must dare to dream and move onward and upward to the future that God has set before us. May today we embrace the vision that Christ has placed before us, strengthen ourselves in the unity of love and fellowship, and equip ourselves to take the necessary action to press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Jesus Christ.