

Becoming More of Who We're Called To Be

A direction for Bridge City Community Church.

October 10, 2014

Be the Church.

This has been the rallying cry for Bridge City for years. It reminds us that the church isn't a building. It isn't a program. It isn't a denomination or organization. It is the people — people who are finding their new identity in Christ, and joining in Christ's work in the world.

As followers of Jesus we participate in Jesus' ongoing mission in the world, and we do it in a way that reflects our best understanding of Jesus' example. We desire to learn from Jesus how to live. In community, we encourage and equip each other on this path, we support each other in life, and we call each other forward in spiritual maturity.

This is what it means for us to be the church.

At this juncture Bridge City is coming to terms with the need to "be the church" in a new way.

Many of us are used to program-oriented churches that provide a wide variety of spiritual and life services under the leadership of professional pastors and leaders. In this kind of church the expectation on participants is to attend, to serve in ways that promote the program, and to give.

This model is no longer workable for us. In our current circumstances it is just not sustainable financially or in terms of the time required of leaders and volunteers. We are required to look for another path forward.

But these circumstances may actually be an opportunity for us.

A leadership-heavy, program-driven church model is quite honestly not in alignment with our ethos as a church, and never really has been.

It also seems clear that this model is becoming less and less effective reaching our neighbors of the Pacific Northwest. This is the world of the "spiritual-but-not-religious." We are finding more and more Christian Non-Goers, who believe in Jesus, who even desire an authentic and impactful spiritual community, but who for one reason or another, have left institutional and program-based church behind.

The question the elders have been reflecting on is this: **What would it look like for us to really be a church built by the people, as they seek Christ and follow His example?**

Our belief in the power and necessity of a community of Jesus' followers has not changed, but we are working out what it means to be an organized community in a way that both lives within our means of time and resources, that is sustainable and healthy for those involved, and that is compelling and intriguing to the world around us.

Transitions We've Already Made.

A year ago we transitioned away from a corporate leadership structure to a leadership model that we believe is more aligned with scripture, and a better expression of our belief about the nature of the church. This elder-led leadership model was a first step in living out a much clearer picture of the "priesthood of all believers," where every follower of Jesus finds their way forward to pursue maturity in Christ, and use their gifts to participate in Jesus' work in the world.

Instead of having pastors who do ministry for us, we chose to have elders and asked them to take on the responsibility of mentoring and encouraging all of us to grow and find ways of doing ministry.

Over the past 18 months we've also dramatically cut our church staff. Bridge City began in 1997 as a multi-staff church, and ever since has had professional pastors and ministry leaders, often times many more than you would expect for a church our size. It became a part of our culture that we "had people to do that," and we benefitted from some wonderful programs.

But our financial circumstances have forced us to rethink how we get ministry done. While it has been painful to let go people that we cared about, this staff reduction has also forced us to think clearly about who we are as a community. Again, we wonder: Is this a God-given opportunity for us?

Where Are We Headed?

At the very beginning, our shared sense was that God was calling Bridge City to be a relational church where people mattered above all. Along the way we refined this sense of calling with the image of the Ripples, 3 circles that defined the different relationships of a healthy spiritual life.

Not only would we be an open and accepting community, but we would also encourage people to grow by investing in their relationship with God (Circle 1), their relationship with others who follow Jesus (Circle 2), and their relationship with the people around them in the world (Circle 3.)

The elders believe that the last two years of adjustments and "pruning" at Bridge City are an opportunity for us to live more fully in our original calling as a church. We wonder if in fact this is God working to bring Bridge City into alignment with God's heart for us.

Now we take the next step. Not only is the church not the building, not the program, and not the organization, the church is also not the leadership. The church is not a manifestation of the personality or leadership of a single pastor, or even a team of elders.

The church is a gathered community of people who are finding their new identity in Christ, and joining in Christ's work in the world.

With this in mind the Elders are suggesting the following changes in how we organize our life together. We believe these grow out of our understanding of scripture and our sense of God's calling to us as a church.

1) Ministry Belongs to the People. Instead of having an expectation that paid professionals will lead us, and that they will do the significant ministry roles, or provide ministry services that we consume, we propose moving to an expectation that ministry is simply the working out of the

church participating in Jesus' mission in the world. Whatever ministry happens at Bridge City will be an expression of the hearts, gifts and callings of the people involved.

2) Investment Flows toward Ministry. People who commit to a church expect to give both time and money. It is so easy for us to see those resources as an opportunity to make the church bigger and better. Instead of having the expectation that time and money invested goes primarily to serve us (the members and participants of the church), we move to an expectation that as much of our shared resources as possible ought to flow toward direct ministry to people, prioritizing whenever possible people outside of our community that we can serve.

3) Participation defines Membership. In our culture the word "membership" has come to indicate a buy-in that offers certain benefits. A member of a health club has the benefit of using the equipment. In scripture "membership" is simply about being a part of the Body (a body part) with a function, helping the Body in its purpose. Instead of membership being a declaration of support of the church, or even an invitation to accountability, we propose moving to a concept of membership that is more like a "team member" or "staff member." When a person decides that they want to discover their identity in Christ (pursue spiritual maturity) and want to join Christ's work in the world (make a difference by blessing and serving), and that they want to do this through the community of Bridge City, they become a "team member," with the commitment to help the body do these things with their own commitment, investment, support, and encouragement.

How We Encourage This.

The Elders have the responsibility for helping the church move forward toward this end. For that purpose we will offer the following opportunities.

Circle 1 -

Each Member is invited to cultivate their inner life and relationship with Jesus Christ. This is something each person is responsible for on their own. However, as a body we can equip and encourage each other toward this goal.

- **Teaching that Equips for Personal Growth.** Both in our Saturday morning preaching, and in classes that we offer, we will provide thoughtful, engaging, Biblical teaching meant to equip you as you cultivate your heart for Spiritual growth.
- **Community Encouragement for Personal Growth.** We grow best when we have a community of people encouraging and cheering us on. We will provide quarterly Home Groups where conversation and relationship can go deeper. We will make sure these groups provide space to talk about and encourage deeper relationship with Jesus.
- **One-on-One Spiritual Coaching & Discipleship.** Some people don't know where to begin to invest in their own inner life and spiritual journey. Others have made a big life change and need direction. Within the limitations of their schedules, the elders will meet with members one-on-one to help you make a plan for your personal spiritual growth.

Circle 2 -

Each Member is invited to build relationships with other people following Jesus, and in these relationships find support, encouragement and the opportunity to practice living the way of Jesus.

- **Home Groups for Deeper Relationships & Growth.** We will provide quarterly Home Groups where deeper relationships are fostered, and personal growth and mission is encouraged.
- **Community Support & Care.** We will encourage Team Members to support and encourage each other, using their time, gifts, and talents to help each other face the difficulties of life, and calling each other forward in spiritual maturity. We will encourage Team Members to take up roles that have traditionally been left for pastors to handle, equipping people to bless and serve each other following the example of Jesus.

Circle 3 -

Each Member is invited to discover their own way of joining in Jesus' work in the world bringing hope, reconciliation, love and truth to people in need through honest relationships of care. Each follower of Jesus is called to this on their own, but as a community we can equip and encourage each other toward this goal, accomplishing things together that we can not accomplish individually.

- **Seasonal Opportunities to Bless & Serve.** During the year we will highlight different opportunities where Team Members can invest their time and resources to bless people in the world. These short-term service opportunities present an introduction to seeing the world as an invitation from Jesus to serve. This includes things like the Christmas Angel Tree ministry and the Samaritan's Purse Shoe Box ministry. We will develop a seasonal schedule of opportunities so that each quarter we have a chance to make a difference in the world together.
- **Ongoing Shared Missions.** As a body we will work together on opportunities to bless & serve. We recommend that we begin with the Mustang Lounge / MHS Ministry, where we have the opportunity to support and feed high school students. The elders will invite us as a church to invest deeply, taking ownership of this ministry, so that we all can participate in one way or another. Outward focused service like this will shape our identity as a body committed to participating in Jesus' work in the world, helping us become more generous and other-centered.
- **Celebrating Individual Missions.** We will encourage and equip you to find your own way to bless and serve in the world in a way that aligns with your life experience, gifts, season of life, and sense of calling. The elders will support you in this, and the church body will celebrate and encourage you.

The elders recommend that in most cases we apply the resources of the church toward supporting and accelerating these goals.