

November 18/19, 2006

## **Finishing Strong: Resourcing the Mission**

Pastor Bryan Clark

Over the last year and a half, we've been working our way through the Book of Acts, and we'll go back to that next week. The last two weeks and this week, we're looking at ourselves as a church and our desire to be faithful to living out the mission that God has given us. In the Book of Acts, we've been reminded that we as the people of God, empowered by the Spirit of God, are the unstoppable Church. Jesus Himself said, "I will build My Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."

In the book of Acts, the defining verse is Acts 1:8, you see it on the screen.

**"...but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."** (Acts 1:8, \*NASB)

When it's all said and done, that is the mission of the Church. We're reminded that as the people of God empowered by the very Spirit of God, our mission, our assignment is to take the message to the streets, around the world, or wherever God calls us. And whether you're called to India or whether you're called to the marketplace, you have a high and holy calling on your life that is ultimately about accomplishing this mission or this purpose that God has given us.

Curt Lehman was the founding pastor of this church and the senior pastor for 32 years. He was also my pastor growing up, and certainly my ministry mentor. And over the years, he taught me many, many things, but perhaps the most significant to me was what I would call this divinely inspired restlessness that defined his life. There was this overwhelming sense of the mission that God has given us to reach lost people and to see them disciplined to become like Jesus. And that was a restlessness, a passion that just defined his life. He lived that, he modeled it, and he led it.

Many times, not only in his modeling but also verbally, he communicated to me that it is so important that we don't get caught up in methods and programs, but there is this relentless pursuit of the mission of reaching lost people and seeing them become like Jesus. As long as there is one more person out there that doesn't know Jesus, the job isn't done and we keep pushing full speed ahead. Well that in essence is how he lived his life, it's how he defined this church, and I trust how it continues to be defined today.

Curt Lehman has gone home to be with the Lord, but thankfully, before God took him home, we sat down with him about the time of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary – and we're just coming up on 45 years now, so this is about four or five years ago – and interviewed him and really had him tell the story of the history of the church and those big steps of faith. So as you listen to him tell the story, it gives you a little sense of where we've come from as a church. As we show you this interview, one of the things I want you to listen for is even over a 40 year period of time, there were still only a handful of those special moments that were big steps of faith that would ultimately define the effectiveness of the church and the ability of the church to continue to be about the mission and ultimately to end up where we are today. So listen for that as you listen to Curt tell the story.

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### **Video Clip Curt and Claudine Lehman:**

**Curt:** Well, the way it all really started was back in 1961, in November of 1961, Dr. Henry Gustin, contacted Ivan Olson and asked if he would consider starting a church here in Lincoln.

Well, it was only a month or so later that they contacted me and said they would like for me to come to be the pastor of the new church. They were hoping to start services sometime in 1962. And the more we had prayed about it, the more we became really convinced that's really what God was wanting us to do, though I didn't want to make any kind of a move. And there were only seven people that were meeting together in a prayer meeting praying for this new church to get started.

We moved to Lincoln late in May and started having the first church services on June 3<sup>rd</sup> up at the YMCA – the old YMCA – which was at 13<sup>th</sup> and P Streets. And as the church grew there at the Y, it wasn't unusual for us to have 45 or 50 college students when we were running maybe 100 people all together in the church service. Well, it was always exciting to have them because they always sat on the front rows. They always sat right down near the front. And they could really sing.

**Claudine:** And they sang loud.

**Curt:** Yeah, they could really sing. So after nearly two years, we of course, we really had been looking for some time for another building somewhere, and the old Union Fire Insurance building at 11<sup>th</sup> and M Streets had been sold to Pat Ash. And so we bought that, remodeled it, made it into a nice church building. Clayton Rock and I went over to see Nathan Gold and asked him if we could use the Gold's parking lot on Sunday mornings, and he was delighted to let us use that. He was pleased that here was a group of people that were really taking big steps of faith. I still remember him specifically talking about that. And so we met there at 11<sup>th</sup> and M Streets, in that building, which is now College of Hair Design – I think that's who we sold it to, and I think that's what it still is – and so we met there for about four years, I believe it was, and it worked out well.

But again, the church grew. God met our needs. We were amazed to see how wonderfully He met the needs financially and spiritually. So then we had to think in terms of making another move. After only two years there, we tried to buy the First Lutheran church building at 17<sup>th</sup> and A Streets, but when we moved in there, it looked so big I couldn't believe we could ever fill that building. We would rattle around in there. You know, we had about 200 people at the most.

**Claudine:** Well, I think one of the things that characterized just about every family that joined us in those early years—they were people that had a vision, they were people that did not look at just what was happening today, but they had a vision. And then they also had the faith to back that vision up and make it happen, which meant they were people that gave of themselves, their time, their money. They were people that could sacrifice and never bat an eye.

**Curt:** Through Ernest Lott, God just so clearly led the board to make the decision, finally, to sell all those properties down there, buy the property at 70<sup>th</sup> and Hwy 2, which we had looked at. Then I think that it was in the spring of 1980 that we moved in to the A Wing over here, that was our first building, then in September, I believe it was, or October of 1994, Bryan Clark was called as the senior pastor to begin the first of January 1995. Again, it was a big step of faith because, you know, our thought was: *He's so young. How could he possibly do this?* With God, nothing is impossible. And God always had a way of leading His people into situations that were too big for them, that were just—for them they were impossible. And I believe that's still what God wants to do.

Probably one of the most difficult things to adjust to along the way was the constant need for change. Growth demands change, and change produces insecurity, and insecurity produces fear. But at the same time, God provides faith. It still astounds me when I see the thousands of people around here, and I marvel that God would call me to be a part of this work, and to Him I am eternally grateful.

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**Pastor Bryan Clark:**

It's doubtful those people 20 or 30 years ago could have imagined that their steps of faith would result in touching and changing the lives of thousands of people both here in Lincoln and around the world. It is a bit sobering to realize how many of the people that will be here this weekend in this facility whose lives have been touched and changed through the ministry of this church would not have experienced that had it not have been for significant, sacrificial steps of faith 20 and 30 years ago.

Part of the problem, though, when a church experiences success – I'm guessing this happens in the market place, I know it happens in the church – is there is a tendency to start to manage that success. You kind of ride the wave, and you start to lose your edge. You kind of lose that sense of urgency, and it's fun just to kind of sit back and enjoy the ride. I remember many times growing up hearing Curt Lehman tell the story that when he was on the farm, he never liked to sit in the back of the wagon and watch where it had been. He always wanted to sit in the front of the wagon and watch where it was going.

Well, all of us as leaders can identify with that, but the reality is, from time to time, it's kind of fun to sit in the back of the wagon and just rest a little bit. But the message he pounded into my head over and over again is you can't do that. There is a sense of urgency to this call. There are people dying without Jesus and every day we must be about the mission. There must be this relentless pressing towards accomplishing the mission that God has given us. The stakes are eternally high.

Thirteen years ago, we went to three morning services on Sunday. A couple of years after that, we added a Saturday night service. A couple of years after that, we added a simulcast service, and this weekend, we'll offer six weekend services. And we, as a Board, were beginning to come to grips several years ago with the reality that we're running out of space, and at some point, we're going to have to address that. But every time it would come up, we would look at the price tag, and it was overwhelming, and we'd move on to another discussion and try to come up with some other creative solution.

But about three years ago this fall, we began to realize we were running out of creative solutions, and this was going to be our moment for our generation to take our step of faith. You know, it's nice to sit in the back of the wagon and look back and celebrate what's happened in the past. But the reality is you can't live that way. At some point, you have to draw from the past to give you the courage to take our steps of faith in order to continue to move ahead and continue to be faithful. Interestingly enough, it was just three years ago this very weekend that we met as a Board and had a very long, very intense discussion realizing that God was leading us to recognize that this was time for our step of faith. And we talked about this, and we wrestled through it. One of the passages that God had placed on my heart – and I'd read it over and over and over again in the months previous to that meeting – was from Numbers Chapter 14.

If you know the story, God had led the children of Israel out of Egypt to the border of the Promised Land and promised them a land flowing with milk and honey, a land that would be their own, a land unlike any other land they could have ever imagined. God sent 12 spies in to spy out the land and come up with a strategy. When they came out, Joshua and Caleb, two of the spies, said, "This is a fabulous land. This is a land flowing with milk and honey. It's everything God ever said it would be. Yes, it's true, there are giants in the land, but by God's power, we can take these guys, and let's take the land." But ten of the spies came out and said, "You know, it is a fabulous land, and it is

flowing with milk and honey. It's everything we could have imagined. But it is full of giants, and these giants are just too big. We don't think we can take the land. We recommend we not go in." And they did persuade the majority. And because the people were unwilling to trust God and take their step of faith, God's judgment on them was that they would wander in the wilderness for 40 years, and there that generation would die without one of them entering the land of promise. And God said, "I'll raise up the next generation and see if they'll be willing to trust Me by faith and enter the land."

It was a very sobering thought to realize, because of the lack of courage and faith of ten leaders, an entire generation died in the wilderness, and they would never see the land. And I began to wonder: *Is it possible that we as leaders, because we lack the faith and the courage to believe God, we could cost an entire generation their shot at experiencing something special that God had prepared for them, and instead we would die in the wilderness, and maybe the next generation would get to experience what God had in mind?* And the reality is, the more God began to press that on my heart, the more I realized: I can't live with that. I couldn't live with the fact that my lack of courage and my lack of faith cost an entire generation their chance to see something special. And I told the men that night, "I would rather die in battle trying to take the land than to die in the wilderness having never had the courage to try by faith." And as we talked about it, we all agreed that that was what God was calling us to.

By the end of that evening, we all got on our knees and we committed before God that this was our moment. This was our moment for our generation to take our step of faith in order to make it possible for God to continue to reach more people to be effective in the mission. Understand, that night we did not get out a bunch of charts and graphs and pour through them and conclude that it looks like this is very reasonable and possible. As a matter of fact, it was just the opposite. It was absolutely overwhelming. It's just like Curt said in that video. There are times when God leads His people to step out into things that are way too big for them so that the only choice is to be dependent upon God, and God will have to show up, and we know that God is God. And that's exactly where we were that night.

Over the next several weeks, we began meeting with hundreds and hundreds of leaders within the church to talk about the vision and where we thought God was leading us. We understood that evening that to choose not to move ahead would have simply been an act of disobedience. At that moment, it wasn't about working out finances on charts and graphs. It was whether or not we were going to choose to be obedient to what we clearly understood God was calling us to. And as we began to talk to leaders in the body, we all understood that, and it was obvious God was in this, and we were in it together.

In January of 2004, we introduced what has become known as the *For This Purpose I Live* campaign. And we laid out the vision of what God was leading us to. Through that night with the Board, and through those discussions with the leaders, the vision unfolded. It included not only an auditorium, but also a 22,000 square foot Youth Complex. It included planting two churches here in Lincoln – one in the inner part of the city and one in North Lincoln. It included identifying, equipping, and funding 100 church planters in India. And it included launching a Christian Leadership College. All of that to be accomplished over the course of the next three years, and it was all very overwhelming.

In wrestling with the reality of the growth that God was giving us and our steps of faith, we recognized that church planting was something that was very strategic and something that very much will define us in the future. We're going to continue to be very aggressive with church

planting, but understanding that church planting is never a solution for growth. For example, over the course of the last three years, we have planted two churches and hived people out of this body to go to those churches, yet this weekend, we will have more people in the facility than we had before we planted those churches. The reality is, church planting is very strategic, but it doesn't take care of the growth problem. And so we launched into this campaign.

The last three years have been both very exciting and very hard. There are times when it just all feels totally overwhelming, and frankly, it feels that way right now. But we've seen God do some significant things in people's lives, and people have responded not only financially - which has been a tremendous response - but also in terms of how the campaign has touched peoples' lives and caused them to rethink what they're living for and what it means to live for that which ultimately matters. Time does not allow us to tell all of the stories; however, there are many stories that we've shared together over the last three years. We want to give you just a reminder of some of those stories.

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**Video Clip: John and Dee Ann**

**John:** We just pinched ourselves that this really was happening, and we had the house that we had dreamed about for 15 years. We had good jobs, we both worked, and we progressed in our jobs and made more money, and we just decided that was the normal course of action that we would build our ultimate dream house.

**Dee Ann:** You just think, you know, this is what it's about. This is the American dream. This is what you worked so hard for. So, it was a great house, and we loved being there.

**John:** God, I think, laid on my heart that I wasn't being a very good steward of the things that He had trusted unto me. That, yes, I was in a house I could afford, that wasn't a problem, but was I in a house that I really needed. And I'll never forget, again, in one of Pastor Clark's sermons, sitting there, and Pastor Clark talking about sacrificing for the ministry and the work of Jesus Christ. And we just knew that that's what we had to do. Once we made the decision, and once the house was sold, and once we got relocated into our current townhouse, there was such great joy in having the opportunity to be able to do what we said we wanted to do, to be able to give to the church.

**Dee Ann:** What an awesome God we have that He gave His only Son for us. And, it's just my privilege, *my* privilege, to serve Him.

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**Video Clip: Alonzo and Tonya**

**Alonzo:** We partied a lot. We indulged in alcohol, marijuana. We also indulged in crack cocaine. I also was like a drug dealer. I sold drugs. Also, I was pretty mean to Tonya, kind of, when we first got together - having other girlfriends and stuff.

**Tonya:** Since we've attended Abiding Grace and have come to know the Lord, we can now sit and pray together. We can talk and read Scripture together. Talk to other people. I'm no longer ashamed to share with *anybody* what God has gotten me through, because I wouldn't have made it through any of the drugs, alcohol, homelessness - I've got a list - but I wouldn't have made it through without God.

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**Video Clip: Brittany**

I got the money from my allowance, which I did by setting the table and cleaning my room and doing other chores. And also, I used some of my birthday money and some of my Christmas money. I did pledge more than what my allowance was, but I knew that God would provide because I've heard so many testimonies and so many stories about people that have gave a lot and then God's given back. It was a lot of faith, really, but God's provided. It feels great to know that you've fulfilled what you've pledged and that you've never run short and it's just – it's so cool. There are a lot of people that haven't heard about Jesus and that don't know about Him, and that's so much more important for them to know about it than for me to spend it on a CD or something, because Jesus is the Way, and the Truth, and the Light, and they need to know about that.

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**Video Clip: Darin**

I'm an electrician, and we are some pretty hard-core cats, and this guy, Dave, started there, and he started playing some K-Love and listening to 88.5, and he says a prayer in the morning before we get going, and says a prayer at lunch before he eats his meal. And, I don't know, I saw it all as really weak until I saw how the guy worked, and man, he was hard-core. I mean, he killed himself to get a job done. He's like a three-man working crew. So I started looking at how he lived his life, and how he related with my boss, and how he was really family-oriented, and just, everything in his life seemed to have so much more depth than what I was used to seeing in other people. And so I thought: *Maybe there's something to how this guy's living.* I started asking questions about it.

Dave said God created all of us, and if that's true – He created us – and if that's true, I'm sure it's for something more than what I've been living for. And the things that I talked to Dave about, and the lyrics I heard in the songs, and the stuff I heard on 88.5 really got me thinking, and thinking on a deeper level, and asking him a lot of questions. And it made me wonder if there's really something to this. So one night I went home and I prayed, "God, if You are real, show Yourself to me. I need to know You on a personal level, and, sure enough, He did."

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**Video Clip: Samm**

In 1997, I collapsed with congenital heart failure, and open heart surgery saved my life. But after that experience, the emptiness and the longing to have more purpose in my life was even more profound. I had mistakenly found significance in who I am in my career rather than who I am in Christ. The question became: Why did God spare my life? Surely He didn't spare my life so I could have nice things. He must have put the Holy Spirit in me for a purpose. I had all the arguments. I told God, "Lord, I really don't have any more time to serve. I work 55 or 70 hours a week. And, I don't have any talent to offer. I didn't go to seminary, and I don't know how to talk to people about God. And my budget is so stretched I can't possibly give any more money." But before that day had ended, I had made a commitment to God that if He would back me up, I was going to say, "Yes, I want to live for that which matters."

I made decisions differently than I did before. I lost my heart for my long work days. I lost heart for working out at the health club for hours a day. I made a decision to not build a new townhouse, but rather to stay in the small two bedroom townhouse that I have. And I just stepped out in faith, and I signed a pledge card for more than I could possibly see myself affording to give. I work at the Stewardship Booth. And it just gives me a great opportunity to tell the story about how God has changed my heart and about what I'm living for. It is God that has given me the courage to change so many selfish, meaningless things in my life and to choose to live for that which matters, that which will last beyond my life. And now, to glorify God by seeking to present every person complete in Christ is my mission, too, and it's for this purpose I live.

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**Pastor Mark Kremer:**

As Bryan learned from Curt, it's that restless passion of our spirits to continue to share the great news of God's transforming power through Christ with folks that drives us to do everything we do. It is about these stories, and hundreds and hundreds of additional stories where we have seen and get the opportunity to witness God's transforming work in peoples' lives that has motivated us to say, "You know, there are some other tools that we need in order to continue to fulfill the mission effectively." And that's really the way to look at buildings and projects. They're just tools. They're tools that God gives to us and that we need to have to continue to fulfill the mission that He's given us. I just want to walk you through some of the things that have been accomplished, in addition to the life-change stories, over the course of these last three years. And some of these things are in the little pamphlet that you have before you. If you just open up the first fold, you'll see under a title *What's Been Accomplished* some of those things.

As Jeff reported last week, the India project is just an amazing thing that we've had a chance to be a part of. A pastor can be supported for \$100 a month to go out into these places where there's no Gospel witness. And so the commitment from the Berean Fellowship was to support, train, and equip 300 church planters that would spread out across India and then begin church planting movements in each of those that would multiply and multiply to see a country transformed by the Gospel. And we took on 100 of those as a goal for our own church, which would have meant, over the course of six years, about \$720,000 to support those 100 pastors. Well, in the course of just three years, we've given almost  $\frac{3}{4}$  of \$1,000,000 - \$730,000 - to support those pastors in addition to our personal involvement in going and helping to make sure there's a structure so that mission work and that church planting movement can grow and expand. And it's just been an amazing thing. And, obviously, that money is in addition to the money that's been given to the General Fund and to our regular missionaries, and to the Purpose. That's another \$730,000 that God has let us collectively pour into reaching the very ends of the earth. A very exciting thing.

One of the first projects we undertook was the building of a new Youth Complex, and we did that for really one reason. As the first thing, in order to expand our simulcast capability at the 11:00 hour, as our college ministry was meeting in the Upper Room and we needed to have some place for them, and then a long term home for our youth ministry. And so we built the Youth Complex that's out here to the east of our building. It's about \$1.8 million in cost, and it's been used by the college ministry on a temporary basis. When the new auditorium opens, they're going to come back into this building into the Upper Room.

At that point, the youth ministry, which has been crammed into a room down below us here for years and years—where there's two or three hundred students at 9:30 and again at 11:00 that are trying to come. And on Wednesday night and Tuesday night they're all crammed into a room that holds about 100-150 comfortably. We just believe that this new tool of this Youth Complex with 22,000 square feet that Bryan mentioned earlier is going to be an incredible tool to disciple our own youth and also as a tool to reach our community and kids in our community for years to come. Part of that is unfinished yet. It will be a project that we'll tackle down the road when God provides, but it is going to be a fantastic tool and a wonderful place where we can continue to see our mission fulfilled for youth.

Another piece, as Bryan mentioned, was the church planting. Two hundred of our own folks went to North Pointe Church, and another couple of dozen went to Abiding Grace, along with two of our staff folks that we sent out to be a part of that North Pointe Church. God is really blessing that work. They've been going for about a year and three months now. They're now in the process of buying land, which they have an agreement on, and are preparing to at some point in the future have

a place to build that church. Right now, they're meeting in North Star High School. You saw a picture there of some of the folks gathered in the commons area there at North Star. They had seven new believers that were baptized at their very first baptism service this fall. And so God is allowing us to reach another part of our city that we could not reach from this campus.

Another project was the Christian Leadership College. This fall, we began with three full time students and dozens more that are taking the Worldview classes and doing some part-time classes. We just see a great opportunity for us to raise up church planters and missionaries and give people, in a fairly short period of time, a rather intense training to prepare them to go out into missions, church planting, and other places. We're also in the process of developing a marketplace track for that just to further equip people who are in the marketplace, like you, providing the skills and tools that you need to be more effective for Christ right where you're planted as doctors, lawyers, nurses, and all the things that you do in the community. So we're very, very excited about that.

And of course, probably the most visible piece of the whole thing is the new auditorium going up out here to the east. That facility will – and you've heard these things before – will more than double our square footage as a building, and when the balcony is fully completed give us the room to have 3,500 folks at one time in that building. Really, for the first time in our history, we'll have the opportunity to grow up to four or five times the size that we are now without having to do another building project. We just don't like having to go through those things. We'd rather pour all of our time and effort and work into people and into ministry, but we need these tools in order to be able to grow. And I really believe God led us very carefully to have a bigger, longer term vision in the building of this building.

There's nothing fancy about this new building, although you're going to really enjoy the worship environment. And I know that for those of you who are in the Upper Room, it's not ideal to have to sit and watch this whole thing this morning on television. And some of you probably are up there wondering: *Why do I have to come here? I can watch television at home.* So in just 20 weeks, we're all going to be able to be in the same room at the same time enjoying the live worship and preaching and all the things that we've come to know and value as a church. So we're very, very excited about that opportunity.

One thing you also need to know is that the total cost of this building is considerably less than what similar buildings are built for around the country. The average cost of a new auditorium like this is usually between \$180 and \$250 a square foot. This building is being built for less than \$100 a square foot. That's why I said it's not going to be anything fancy. But it's going to be very effective. And it's going to be a really wonderful environment. But through some very hard work by our staff, by our architects, and by the construction company, we were able to limit the cost on those things and find cheaper ways of doing high quality things. And it is going to be a tool not only for us to continue to grow as we equip people on the weekends to grow in Christ and to be effective in their personal mission, but it is also going to be a tool for us to reach our community. We can envision a lot of things in the future that we can do to draw people from our community in to experience the love of Christ and God's people as we do some things in some new, unique, and creative ways in the days to come.

Now, you may think that with all of that going on over these last three years that maybe that's all that we've done is just focused on these buildings and these church plantings and all that? But I'll just tell you that very little of the time of our leaders has been spent on these projects once the decision was made. We turned that over to other folks, and they've run with it. And our time and energy and passion continue to be people. And if you open up your brochure all the way to the

middle section in the far left hand panel, you'll see it says, *Meanwhile Home Base and Missions Have Grown*. There are a number of really significant things that have happened in our ministry over the last three years that are the heart and soul of who we are as a church. We've more than doubled the number of LifeGroups we have, we've added key staff in different areas, and Bryan will talk a little bit more about that in a minute as it relates to children and youth, but God has just done some wonderful things because we just believe that God is opening doors of opportunity that we need to be prepared for. We want to reach our community. We want to touch people right where they're at and allow them to come to know Christ and have those issues and struggles and challenges in their life met and dealt with.

One of those things that has changed and grown over these last three years is the number of support and recovery ministries for people who are struggling with various things as they come to seek help. And that's been a very exciting thing. But we also have a number of opportunities for people to grow at every single level - whether it's leadership and theology or whether it's classes in parenting and marriage, or dealing with aging parents - whatever the issue is or whatever the need is, we've tried very hard to make sure that we have ministry that can reach you and help you in the places where you particularly need help. We've even been able to send out new career missionaries. Now with 45 career missionaries, along with the more than 100 students on a short term basis that we send out to 15 countries, and many more other short term teams, we'd even love to see that grow in the future.

And, I think that the last thing that I want to mention is really the amazing work that you saw in a couple of these testimonies of God working in us to help us understand that the financial resources and the talents that we have are not ours, they're His. And as we have really understood that becoming a good steward is a part of growing up in Christ, God has made us a much more generous people than we were before all this began. In fact, our giving in all of these projects that we've mentioned has grown over 62.5%. And we believe that God wants to even challenge us to do more because of the magnificence of who He is and the challenge and the opportunities that are before us.

And that stewardship message that God's given to us things that we can invest in eternity has penetrated old folks, and middle-aged folks, and young folks, including children. And many of our children have been involved over the last few years in collecting their dimes and pennies, and allowances and giving that to be a part of these projects. And so this morning, I want a couple of these children to come on up. They would like to present to us as a congregation a check for the funds that they have raised over these last few years out of their own resources towards our Purpose. Pretty amazing that just with pennies, nickels, and things that they've been able to do and chores, they've raised \$2,386.61 in about the last 18 months, so let's give them a hand for their steps of faith. Thank you. Thanks.

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**Pastor Bryan Clark:**

As Mark said, we're very encouraged by what God has done. One of the statistics in the folder that excites me the most is in the last three years we've baptized over 240 people. As we've seen people come to know Jesus as Savior, God is doing a significant work.

For whatever reason, God has chosen to put our story on a national stage. There's an organization in Atlanta called *Generous Giving* who became aware of our steps of faith three years ago and have kind of tracked our progress. And they've seen the generosity of our people. Twice in the last three years, they've been here, they've taped video footage, they've written our story, they've documented our story, and it's gone out to a national audience. This past September, I had the

privilege of going to Dallas and standing before 900 pastors representing 900 churches across the United States and basically just tell our story – tell our story of our steps of faith and the generosity of our people and what’s transpired.

It was very exciting, but in the midst of that, I had to tell them the story’s not over. You know, we’re still slinging swords and tackling giants in the land, and that kind of brings us to where we are right now. We’re still in the middle of the battle. One of the reasons we’re having this discussion today is because for a lot of people, year-end giving is a significant part of their giving. We wanted to give people time to process this as we head into year-end. Where are we now? Well, from now until the end of July is a critical time period. The bank has agreed to loan us \$8 million, which means of all this project, everything has to be boiled down to owing no more than \$8 million. And so, that’s about \$2.5 million of Purpose money that has to come in between now and the end of July in order to accomplish that. The Business Team has negotiated a very favorable rate, and that would be kind of a minimal standard. No matter what, we have to get to that point.

But we think we can do better than that. One of the things that might help you as you process this is to understand not only have we worked really hard to get the cost of the building down – and those numbers are really quite remarkable – but in addition to that, every single ministry area in this year’s budget took a 40% cut. That’s a significant cut, because we knew this would be a very tight year financially. In addition to that, there was no one on the staff that even got a cost of living increase this year in order to get through, again, what we knew would be a very tight year. So we really have tightened our belt, and we’re doing our best to get through what’s going to be a challenging year.

So what do we need you to do? *First*, we need people who have made a pledge to fulfill that pledge. We still have about \$2.5 million of pledge money out there, and we’re asking people to fulfill the promise they made. Now I’ve told you this before, nobody tracks that. If I happen to be looking at you when I say that, it’s merely a coincidence. The reality is we don’t know what you pledged. Even our recording secretary doesn’t know that. They just record the gifts that you send. We don’t know what you pledged. We’re not tracking that; we don’t know if you’re ahead or behind. It’s just between you and God. But let me say that again: It is between you and God, and you made a promise to God, and we’re just asking you to keep that promise.

*Second*, there are some of you that weren’t around three years ago when we did this, or you just weren’t in a position to help. We would ask you to prayerfully consider getting on board in these critical months between now and July. You don’t have to turn anything in; you don’t have to fill anything out. When you make your gift, just mark it “Purpose”. But from now until July – maybe that’s \$100 a month, maybe it’s \$500 a month, maybe it’s \$1,000 a month – whatever you can do that all of us collectively be a part of getting us through what’s going to be a very challenging time period.

*Third*, I want you to think of this as the gift of a lifetime. And what I mean by that is every year we get to this time of year, and we talk about year-end giving and how important that is, and that’s just kind of the rhythm of church life. That will always be the case. But it’s very important that you understand, I’m not saying this morning we need a *good* year-end gift. I’m saying we need a good year-end gift *times ten*. This is one of those defining moments. I really wrestled this week before God not to over-dramatize this and not to use language that I don’t think is accurate. But the reality is, in my 23 years as a pastor, I’ve never used that phrase before and I don’t anticipate I ever will again. This isn’t just another year-end. In 40 years of history, now 45 years of history, you can count on one hand the number of these kinds of moments. And it’s hard for me to imagine in the

next 20 or 30 years there will be another one like this. So I'm asking you, would you prayerfully consider what I'm calling "the gift of a lifetime"? This is one of those rare moments that will define us as a generation, one of those moments that people in the past have sacrificially responded to to make this possible for us today that we might do the same for the generation to come.

I don't know what that might look like for you. I'm asking you to think about something you've probably never thought about before, to prayerfully consider something that you've never really considered before. This is maybe something that you've never done before, and you may not do it again, but this is our moment as our generation to take our step of faith. It might mean cashing in some stock or an investment. It might mean selling some property. It might mean something else. I don't know what it might mean. We had that wonderful story by John and Dee Ann where they downsized their house so they could give more to God. I also know people in the last three years who have built very nice homes and been very generous to the campaign, so it could look any way for you.

One of the unique things that President Bush has done for '06 and '07 – and there's a yellow insert about this in the bulletin – is he's made it possible for people who are 70 and older to actually give gifts to churches out of their IRA in a way that's very tax advantageous to you. So maybe you have way more than you could ever use in retirement, and this is a rare opportunity to use that and steward it for God's purposes, whatever that might mean for you. It might mean for some a \$1 million dollar gift. It might be for some a half million, maybe for some \$1,000 or \$100, whatever God leads you to give. But I want you to think about it in very specific terms. This is kind of a gift of a lifetime moment. Prayerfully consider what God would have you to give.

One of the things that struck me in the Mission Focus Weekends over the last two weeks was the reality that reaching the world for Christ is something that actually could be accomplished in our lifetime. The ratio now between believers and unbelievers is 1:6. I don't know that there's ever been a generation in 2000 years that could have, with credibility, said, "We could reach every corner of the earth within our lifetime." But I believe we can say that. Everybody today is so concerned about the radical Islamic taking over the world. But the reality is that's a man-made religion. What's taking over the world is the unstoppable Church of Jesus Christ. And it is possible that the world could be reached in our lifetime. And for whatever reason, God has made it possible that we could be a significant player in that movement.

Do you suppose, if God so moved us and we wiped out this debt in the next months, I would get invited back to Dallas to finish the story? And the answer is: absolutely. And imagine how energized and excited 900 pastors representing 900 churches across the United States would be if they realized how God had moved in the hearts of His people, and how a big vision was funded by God's people in their generosity. They would go back to their churches and be energized and renewed in their vision to do the same thing—900 churches across the United States would start a movement that could be a significant part of accomplishing the mission. And for whatever reason, God has positioned us in such a place that we could be a significant catalyst in seeing that happen.

The reality is, if we paid off the debt, for starters, it would save us \$5.5 million in interest charges. That money could be spent in ministry in many different ways. In addition to that, because of the size of the auditorium, we believe it's possible to pay off the debt and that would be the end of our indebtedness for the history of the church. We really would like to move forward on a cash only basis, so this is that moment in time that could define the ability to do ministry for generations to come.

I realize there are 101 different things that we could spend money on. I've got that list and so do you. But I'm asking you between now and July, would you prayerfully consider what God would have you do? Consider in unique terms: *This is our moment; this is our step of faith to be willing to give the gift of a lifetime.* As we in the next months begin to unfold the vision for where God is leading us, I have to tell you I'm more energized and more excited about the vision to come than anything I've been a part of in my 23 years in ministry. And I think God wants to do significant things. And the only thing that is really going to prevent us from moving full speed ahead is if we can't get this debt managed. It's kind of like a ball and chain dragging along behind us. If we could just be done with it and move on and accomplish what God has for us.

One of the things I'm really excited about is the children's ministry and youth ministry. We're excited about where those ministries are going. You're going to hear more about that in January. I'm very excited to have Dan Moeller here as the Children's Pastor. Dan's got a big vision, and we're expecting God to do significant things in Children's Ministry in the months ahead. Just as the significant steps of faith by faithful people in the past have made it possible for us to do what we do today, in the same way, our steps of faith will make it possible for these children today who will become the leaders tomorrow to do their part in accomplishing the mission. So it seems right to have Dan, as our children's pastor, come and lead us in a prayer of dedication as we pull together. We bring this before the Lord and ask God to do something special among us. So I'm going to ask us to stand, both here in the auditorium and in the Upper Room. After Dan's prayer, the choir will close us out with one final song, and then we'll be dismissed.

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**Pastor Dan Moeller:**

I invite you to bow your heads with me this morning:

*Father, we sit here today, and it's a big vision. It's a big vision that You've asked us to step up to. And Lord, I know in our hearts there could be a part of us that looks at it and says it's just too big. There's a part of us that could step back even in fear. Father, I pray that You would not allow that to happen in our lives. Father, that we would step up, that we would look at this as our Promised Land, our moment, our moment to step out in faith, our moment to make a decision for a lifetime that is going to affect for years to come the effectiveness of this church. Lord, I thank You so much for those You have called here, and those who are giving of their time, their resources, their finances. I pray, Father, that You would move in our hearts to call us to that greater step. I pray that You would call us as a people to spend the next couple of months specifically praying for our church and praying for the needs that we've talked about. I pray, Father, for those who are still sitting on the sidelines, that You would call them forth to give of their time, their talents, their abilities, to be a part of the mission. And I pray, Father, You would call us forth to take a big step of faith in our finances, to give in a way that we have never given before because we believe in what You're doing; we believe Your hand is moving in our midst, and we are excited and want to be a part of that. So help us Father. Give us the strength to not step back, but to step forward and believe in You and what You're doing. I pray this in Your Son's name, Amen.*

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