

January 5, 2022

Happy new year to each of you!

Last fall we spent a good deal of time articulating the four directional components of our church: the purpose, mission, vision and strategy. Each work together in sequential fashion to define our ministry and keep us moving in a biblical direction. Our purpose (“why do we exist?”) is to *glorify God*. Our mission (“what are we doing?”) is to *make disciples*. Our vision (“where are we going?”) is a *people redeemed* (planted churches). Last, our strategy (“how do we attain our vision?”) is the application of the *missionary task*.

The first three of four components have a single dimension. However, our strategy is multi-faceted as it is a pathway on which we move from making to multiplying disciples. The missionary task consists of six elements: entry, evangelism, discipleship, healthy church formation, leadership development and exit. Each element is a critical piece of a multiplication strategy as seen in texts such as Acts 14:21-23,

“When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”

The International Mission Board uses such a framework in their engagement of unreached people groups. Following the apostolic model, missionaries first find entry among a people group and begin to share the gospel. As converts are made, they work to disciple them. As these young Christians grow, missionaries assess their giftings and assimilate them into ministry involvement. Lastly, missionaries lead the disciples to gather regularly for corporate worship. They then identify and raise up pastoral leadership from among the disciples, frame out an ecclesiology and then prayerfully exit the people. Task complete. Such a process is the work of moving from no gospel presence to a church planted and multiplying. The missionary task—a pipeline for making, moving and multiplying disciples.

But that task is not just for missionaries. It’s for every Christian. It’s for every church. It is the work of accomplishing the Great Commission. We are all called to make and multiply disciples and, therefore, embrace the missionary task. Churches do well to train their people to be proficient for such a work. After all, the Great Commission is the responsibility of the church and not a denominational entity.

It is therefore appropriate for churches to install the missionary task as the discipleship process for their own people. As missionaries are proficiently trained in the elements of the task, so should every Christian be generally equipped to leverage their life on mission as well.

For this month and the following three, I’d like to show how a strategy of the missionary task could apply to life in the local church. This month, we’ll take the first two elements of the task in conjunction together: **Entry and Evangelism**.



How might we embrace these first two elements of the missionary task in the local church?

From parking lot to pew | We often say that because Jesus was in the people business, we are too. That means we aren't just ministering to people we know, but we're also meeting and ministering to those we don't know. Therefore, the missionary task starts in the parking lot. People are coming to us (Element 1: Entry) giving us a hand-delivered opportunity to engage them with Christian kindness, hospitality, ministry and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Remember this: every Sunday is someone's first Sunday at church. That's a humbling reality. We are never to underestimate the importance of a well-serviced welcome ministry (including online platforms). From the space to the team and the materials they make available, each are working to ensure we have an undistracted, clutter-free opportunity to introduce people to Jesus. Be a missionary—invite people to church (and serve on the welcome team!).

The Sunday worship gathering | What kids often call “big church” is indeed the most important hour of the Christian's week. All roads lead to the time where the church gathers for worship through the singing, praying, and preaching of God's word. Though this time is primarily for the disciple (as it is the gathering of God's people), churches do well to leverage this time to evangelistically engage unbelievers. From the welcoming acknowledgment of their attendance to the two-prong approach of gospel-doctrine expository preaching, what we say from the platform matters, *evangelistically*. Every Sunday we have a controlled space to engage people with the gospel. In the end, we are seeking to make worshippers of God (cf. John 4:23-24). Therefore, as one who stands on the platform each Sunday, I seek to be conscientious of who's in the room in order to best leverage my ministry towards the unbeliever. I am a pastor-preacher, but I am also an evangelist (cf. 2 Tim. 4:5).

Gospel Conversations | If we seek to make and multiply disciples, this much is clear—we must practice personal evangelism. The first step in making disciples is to share the gospel. There is no discipleship without conversion, and there is no conversion without the gracious communication of the gospel. We are therefore on safe ground to assume Jesus' words in Matthew 28:19, “Go and make disciples,” include the sharing of the gospel. The Great Commission will never be accomplished if its work is truncated to Sunday alone. No, God's people must hit the streets, and the “highways and the hedges” (Luke 14:23). I'm reminded of John 1:35-51 where we are told of how Andrew found Peter and Philip found Nathaniel. The kingdom of Christ is built one person at a time. Let's keep that truth in focus.

To help us along in our personal evangelism, you'll find a small card included with this letter that articulates the gospel. Memorize it, share it and give it to a friend. At a time when new year's resolutions are made, let me encourage you to make personal evangelism a regular habit of life.

In summary, the missionary task serves to equip the church for life on mission. Each component of the task is a necessary proficiency needed in order to make and multiply disciples. Christians maturing along this framework will learn and practice sharing the gospel, teaching the Bible, serving the church and leading the mission. Churches, therefore, that are intentionally equipped at such a level of missional aptitude will be best poised to multiply themselves for kingdom advancement. That's very good news.

God bless you, church. Let's live on mission together.

Pastor Neal

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February 11, 2022

Greetings!

This past week a few of our pastors and I visited our good friend Morgan Proudfoot in New Bedford, MA. He serves as the lead pastor of Grace Harbor Church, a church planted through the support of the North American Mission Board. Allow me to pause and thank you on his behalf for your generosity in giving to the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering. The work at GHC is going quite well, but the labor has just begun.

New Bedford is not Coats, and neither is Massachusetts North Carolina. Yet our brothers and sisters living in a coastal New England fishing port share our same mission: to make disciples. Our methods may be contextual, but our message and our mission are certainly not. Jesus saves, and he minced no words in charging his newly minted band of followers with a mission to change the world:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Mt. 28:19-20)

To walk on New England soil is to be liberated from the trappings of nominal Christianity. Following Jesus is neither cool nor cultural in the northeast United States. However, whether you are in Mexico or Massachusetts or anyplace in between (like Coats), every context reminds us that the mission of making disciples requires ruthless intentionality and a process for multiplication. As some have said, the Great Commission is not the Great Suggestion. Amen. Furthermore, the Great Commission is the responsibility of the churches and the Christians that comprise them, not a denominational entity. Bearing the burden of making disciples and reaching the nations, we must approach such work with purpose and preparation. Followers of Jesus therefore must ever be growing in the core competencies of The Missionary Task.

The Missionary Task is a framework for making, maturing and multiplying disciples. Each component represents a core competency needed to multiply both the individual disciple and the church as a whole. You can see the natural progression of this framework and how both spiritual and ministerial maturity comes with movement along its track. I’d like to continue demonstrating how the missionary task as a multiplication strategy applies to life in the local church. Let us consider the component of: **Discipleship**.



Allow me to begin by defining some key terms.

Disciple | The New Testament is replete with the word “disciple” *mathētēs* (Gk. μαθητής). It’s used over 250 times and can be translated as “follower, student, pupil or learner.” (cf. Lk. 6:40) On three different occasions Jesus notes characteristics of a disciple: Obedience to his teachings (Jn. 8:31), love for fellow believers (Jn. 13:35), and the bearing of spiritual fruit (Jn. 15:8). To be a Christian is to be a “disciple.”

Discipling | The act of making disciples. In Mt. 28:19 the two words “make disciples” is one verb in the Greek. Jesus is commanding his disciples (remember his audience) to... *disciple*. The NT assumption is that disciples “make disciples” or disciples *disciple*. I love how Pastor Tommy puts it: “The church is not an organization that makes disciples. The church is an organized group of disciple makers.” That’s so true. Those who follow Jesus, therefore, help others follow Jesus as well.

Discipleship | The process of growing as a disciple. To be a disciple means one is continually learning to follow Jesus and become more like him. Not only in knowledge, behavior and proficiencies, but in *holiness*. Discipleship is spiritual growth in all facets of life. Dave Rhodes of Future Church Co. quipped, “Discipleship is not simply becoming like Jesus, but becoming the person Jesus would be if he were you.

How then do disciples obey the command of Jesus to *make* disciples? Baptizing and teaching.

Baptizing | Because baptism assumes conversion (cf. Acts 2:38), Jesus’ command to “go” assumes evangelism. We are to share the gospel, see people converted to Christ, and upon their profession of faith in Christ, we are to baptize them into the membership of the local church.

Why is this important? Because the New Testament knows nothing of lone ranger disciples. This cannot be stressed enough. Private Christianity is not endorsed on the pages of Scripture. The Christian life is surely personal, but it is anything but private. Christ calls us to a public life and profession. Baptism is act of obedience and is thus the initial step of discipleship. New believers take their profession public and begin their journey with Jesus. “Baptizing them” *baptizō* (Gk, βαπτίζω) is therefore the church’s affirmation and assimilation of the new believer *into* the local church. How a church thinks of membership will inevitably affect their efforts to make disciples. Baptism, and membership, matter.

Teaching | If disciples (noun) are going to disciple (verb), they must learn to teach the Bible. Such a competency of studying and teaching is the thrust of the second component of The Missionary Task, Discipleship. Jesus did not command his disciples to push programs or concoct experiences, but to “teach *didaskō* (Gk: διδάσκω) them to observe all that I have commanded you.” The church may have many ministries, but its first ministry is *teaching the Bible*. I am convinced that the greatest need of the church is more people equipped to make disciples with nothing more than a Bible in their hand.

Disciple-making therefore in its most distilled form is teaching people the Bible. And in order to multiply disciples, we teach people *how* to teach people the Bible (cf. 2 Timothy 2:1-2). Disciples are shaped by Scripture. It is only through the knowledge of our Bibles we able to grow in our knowledge of God. Information plus application leads to life transformation. True change is the true goal of discipleship.

When I think of Grace Harbor Church and those who lead them, I am reminded of the words of Nehemiah in chapter 4 verse 6, “So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind for the work.” Both the Spirit and the saints are working in New Bedford, yet their need is simple: they need people to join them in their work on the wall.

God bless you, church. May we embrace The Missionary Task as we make disciples together.



March 14, 2022

Greetings faith family,

The local church is a missional community. We understand that. It was born on mission and therefore breathes by mission. To say “church” is to say “mission.” The witness of Scripture attests that God’s plan A to advance the gospel across the globe is through the multiplied church, and he has no plan B. To that we say a hearty, “Amen.”

For a few months now, we’ve been talking about missional multiplication in our study of the “the missionary task” developed by the International Mission Board (imb.org). The task is outlined as a strategic framework designed to make disciples and plant churches (think, going from no one is a Christian to a church is planted). It articulates the essential work of the Great Commission and is therefore not a task for just missionaries but for every Christian, for every church in every context. As we have said before, churches are not organizations that make disciples but a gathering of disciples organized to make more disciples while living on mission together.

For a church to multiply it must be filled with people equipped and practicing core competencies of a missional lifestyle. From Entry to Exit, each component of the missionary task fosters multiplication among individual disciples and churches as a whole. You can see the natural progression of this framework and how both spiritual and ministerial maturity comes with movement along its track. Every Christian (= disciple) is a missionary and should be equipped to leverage their life on mission. Churches comprised of such disciples are then poised to multiply and reach their communities in a way that no singular Christian can do alone.

Having studied the components and correlating competencies of Entry, Evangelism and Discipleship, we now follow the framework to do what has been called “making the turn” into the fourth component — **Healthy Church Formation**.

It consists of twelve healthy church characteristics describing what a sustainable church should be. Think of them as twelve discipleship diagnostics. Healthy disciples simply pursue life and ministry practices that give way to healthy churches. These twelve marks are the spiritual product of learning to “observe all that I have commanded you,” as Jesus said (Mt. 28:20). My thesis is simple: Healthy Christians make healthy churches.



See enclosed bookmark for a list of all twelve healthy church characteristics

Each characteristic represents a metric of church health. Ideally, a church should be characterized by all twelve marks because their people are applying what they are learning in robustly biblical discipleship. Coats Baptist understands this connection. For example, as they have been taught to have a high view of Scripture, it comes as no surprise that biblical preaching and teaching is a characteristic of the church. Expository preaching is a distinctive of our ministry and we make no apologies for it. But by using these twelve characteristics of church health, how are we doing in terms of church health? I’d say fairly well. In most metrics, we are a healthy church.

As you survey the characteristics, you’ll see that some are more subjectively intangible (i.e., Fellowship) while others are more tangibly objective (i.e., Baptism and the Lord’s Supper). It is difficult to make an accurate assessment of everything. However I do want to press into one characteristic that is overtly objective to take a temperature of church health: **Biblical giving**. People give or they don’t. But as Jesus taught us, how we view the dollar is often a symptom of the heart (Luke 16). Stewardship, financial giving of tithes and offerings, is thus a key metric to determine the health of any local church. Such a metric always deserves our best attention.

Let me say upfront, Coats Baptist is a very generous church. Scores of faithful Christians practice biblical stewardship. Seldom have we ever fallen on financial hard times, nor have we ever failed to meet financial giving goals. However, evidence suggests that some are not giving at a level of biblical expectation (2 Cor. 9:7-8), and thus the church is not reaching its full financial potential. Let me graciously explain.

Few years have gone by where our undesignated receipts total our proposed annual budget. How can we remedy that reality? With at least two ways:

1. **We need more givers.** I don't think this is new. I certainly don't know, or want to know, names, but numbers do tell a story. Think with me: We currently have between 150-160 households attending once per month. We call that our unique number. Say if the average total gross household income is \$75,000 (and I'm simply guesstimating given our demographics), our annual undesignated receipts should be \$1.125 M. It's simple math: 150 households x \$7,500 as total annual tithe will give you the number. We've never given that much, but think about it. Giving, not money, is the issue. The money is in the pew. Our pastors are committed to teaching basic biblical stewardship to church members, new and not. For starters see: coatsbaptist.com/give
2. **Vision must drive the budget.** Most churches create a budget based on expected receipts, not on vision. That in turn makes the vision (or lack of) a servant of the budget, unfortunately. Over the years our vision has not been the most clear, and consequentially, the budget has followed suit. But that is changing positively. Vision is beginning to drive our budget, not the other way around. Church budgets should reflect a vision to pursue, more than just bills to pay. People are more prone to give to that which is beyond themselves. When vision is baked into the budget, the budget becomes a tool to accomplish the mission of the church: to make disciples. Your pastoral and financial teams are committed to that reality.

Annie Armstrong Easter Offering – Sunday, April 10

Speaking of vision, here is an opportunity to leverage your finances for the future of North American church planting. We live in a real, broken world in desperate need of the gospel and churches who minister accordingly. So, in obedient faith we step forward to give like never before to this year's AAEO. Our goal is \$25,000. Enclosed is an envelope for your convenience, but you can always give via our church website. An offering is not a tithe but over and above regular giving, which makes your offering very special to the Lord and to the recipient. If you can only make one financial gift this April, please tithe. But if you can give an offering, please know that all funds collected go directly to the field in support of church plants and their planters. Visit: anniearmstrong.com

Each year you are faithful to go above and beyond our goal. It truly is "more blessed to give than receive," (Acts 20:35). Just look at these numbers: 2019 goal \$20K, collected \$27,113; 2020 goal \$22k, collected \$26,718; 2021 goal \$22k, collected \$36,640. Are you seeing a trend? As a result, we are doing something a little different this year that is quite remarkable. Annie has a face at Coats Baptist – Grace Harbor Church in New Bedford, MA.

We want to make a one-time supportive contribution to their ministry efforts, in giving any *average* of our \$25,000 goal directly to them. Grace Harbor is a newer NAMB church plant that still receives AAEO support to help them reach financial sustainability. However, churches like ours can help them in a big way. Perhaps God will lead us to formally partner with them in the days ahead. Time will tell. In the meantime, let's pray for Grace Harbor as a gospel-centered sister church. Let's bless them this Easter. More details to come this Sunday.

It's All About Him!

PS. We're sending another vision team to Mexico, March 24-30. Be in prayer for them and the Nahuatl people! (Psalm 67:3)



April 12, 2022

Greetings church,

This week marks the most important event of history: the resurrection of Jesus Christ (cf. Luke 24:1-12). Many know it as Easter Sunday. As we've been studying in the Gospel of Luke, this was the week of Jesus' passion where he would suffer and die for the sins of everyone who would place faith in him (cf. Matt. 1:21; Titus 2:14). Beginning on Monday with his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus would be arrested on Thursday night, tried on Friday morning and suspended on a Roman cross by noon day, then "breath[ing] his last" (Luke 23:46) before sundown. He was buried in a borrowed tomb, but the Father would raise Jesus from the dead on the third day.

What is most remarkable are the words of the resurrected Christ to his freshly encouraged disciples. He says, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." (John 20:21) God is a missionary having sent his Son into the world for a specific task, to die for sinners. In turn, he then sends us with a specific task, to make disciples. Jesus prayed to his Father, "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." (John 17:18) We therefore cannot separate the resurrection of Christ from the Great Commission of Christ (Matt. 28:18-20). We are a sent people on mission into the world. Mark this: You can't say "Easter" without "Missionary Task."

Multiplication is a downstream consequence of responding positively to an upstream conviction—that Christ has commissioned us, and the Spirit of God empowers us to make disciples. We've learned that the natural result of disciple making should be the planting of churches. Church growth most biblically is not always in size but also in number. Churches do well to consider their *sending* capacity over their *seating* capacity. Church planting, we have said, is the symptom, not the source of disciple making. Jesus never said "plant churches," but "make disciples." However, for churches to be planted, leaders must be developed. The missionary task is only complete when discipleship has reached a state of multiplication: that the disciple is not only equipped to make other disciples but also to *lead* in that effort. Healthy churches must have spiritual leadership to shepherd and serve God's people, leading them to be a body of disciple-making disciples in a perpetual state of multiplication.

Our focus this month is on the final fifth and sixth components:

Leadership Development and **Exit**. To complete the task the missionary must appoint leaders (Titus 1:5). Exit is only an option once a church is self-sustaining under its own leadership. But at the same time, a church's sending capacity must reach a state of *viability*. Multiplication is predicated on the fact that people are presently able to be sent and take others with them—"And they sent Barnabas to Antioch." (Acts 11:22) Such is the burden of these final components, to disciple and raise leaders for the local church near and new. I'd like to chart two paths of application: the particular and the general. Let's take those in turn.



Particular Application for Some Church Leaders

It all goes back to polity. Healthy polity leads to multiplication. The New Testament presents the local church as being led by a plurality of pastors and served by a plurality of deacons. These are the terminal ends of internal leadership development. These two pluralities provide the natural spaces for disciples to minister as their giftings are developed. Certainly not everyone will serve as a pastor or deacon, but the character requirements of these two offices should be the aspiration for every Christian. Missionaries and pastors alike are always looking for new people to install in these offices. Such is the posture of church growth in both size and number.

Pastor Neal