

FUTURE STORY

November 24, 2013

Bethany Christian Church

(Disciples of Christ)

Arapahoe, North Carolina

The Vision and Future Story that follow are written as if we are two years in the future, looking back on what we did to get there.

Bethany's Future Story begins with a vision that focuses on five areas of our life as church: Christian Education, Outreach, Leadership, Worship and Evangelism. From this vision we begin the journey.

VISION

Jesus came to us and said, *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”* We are a church transforming because each of us as individuals was transformed to put Jesus Christ at the center of our lives. We are closer to Christ because we put Jesus ahead of everything. We listen to his word and we serve him according to his word; we pray for the guidance of Christ and the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our church; we practice the love of Christ toward everyone because we love Christ; we worship him gladly and joyfully as our lord and savior; and with the same joy and enthusiasm, we tell all about his word, his love for us and his promise of salvation. We are being transformed into Fishers of Men.

Christian Education – We listen to Jesus’ word and teach people to obey what he commanded us: The Holy Bible is the basis for living our lives and for our spiritual growth. A strong bible-centered Sunday School program is the cornerstone of our Christian Education program, augmented by regular bible study and special programs, including revivals. The Sunday School program for youth reinforces parents’ home-based bible study.

Outreach – We serve him according to his word: *“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”* We use our resources for those in our community who want to be part of a church family and the body of Christ, and we find ways to reach and help people whose lives need to be touched by Christ.

Leadership – We practice the love of Christ toward everyone because we love Christ: All of us are ministers who lead by example and others can see the Holy Spirit working through us. We participate regularly in worship services and church life activities. Elders encourage other members of the congregation to visit the sick and shut-ins with them. Leadership training is available to all, and all are encouraged to become church leaders.

Worship – We worship him gladly and joyfully as our Lord and Savior: The Holy Bible is our guide and the Holy Spirit is our inspiration. We are excited about attending worship services and tithing, not out of obligation, but because of our love for the Lord. We see ourselves as a ministry team contributing our talents to different aspects of church life. Our music and services include a broad range of styles designed to provide spiritual food for everyone, all contributing to the reverent, but joyful, worship of our God. The pastor’s messages are taught from the Word of God and reach out to the lost and hurting, leading them to a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Evangelism – We make disciples: We don’t keep to ourselves; we go out and share God’s love and grace with everyone we encounter. We do this by being ourselves – people for whom Christ is the center of our lives, and whom the Holy Spirit enables to do what Christ wants us to do.

FUTURE STORY

Christian Education

Christian Education is how we teach our people about Christ so they will put Him at the center of their lives and become “fishers of men.”

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION – We listen to Jesus’ word and teach people to obey what he commanded us: *The Holy Bible is the basis for living our lives and for our spiritual growth. A strong bible-centered Sunday School program is the cornerstone of our Christian Education program, augmented by regular bible study and special programs, including revivals. The Sunday School program for youth reinforces parents’ home-based bible study.*

To become effective fishers of men, we knew that we would have to have good Sunday School lessons for adults, children and youth. To make Christ the center of our lives and our church, we re-emphasized Sunday School, which begins at 10 A.M. Now, because of the Leadership Program we instituted, we have more dedicated teachers who teach lessons from the Bible, but the classes offer different topics based on the Bible so that people can find a class in which they are interested. Our Sunday School attendance has increased twenty percent, and we continue to try to find better ways to teach the Bible to make classes more interesting to draw more people.

But not all adults face the same issues in their lives and need the same kind of scriptural lessons. We realized the need for a young couples class to fill a gap in our Sunday School program, so one of our young couples agreed to facilitate the class, and now several young couples have been brought together in a class that uses scripture to address their particular issues and needs.

As a rural church we do not have the resources of churches in large population centers, and over the past 15-20 years, our children and youth membership has been lower due to changing demographics. To help our children put Jesus at the center of their lives, we used the smaller numbers as an opportunity to give children and youth more one-on-one time with teachers and other adults. We tailored our Sunday School lessons and youth programs toward how children and youth actually learn: by doing, not just by listening and memorizing. We also stressed the importance of giving our children and youth responsibility within our church family to help grow their understanding of the gospel and their faith. This led not only to Sunday School programs that emphasize responsibility and the gospel, but to the children and youth leadership program in which they participate in all the church activities and governance, and begin the journey of becoming church leaders themselves. Understanding that children are the best evangelists for other children, we emphasized being fishers of men in our children and youth programs.

Before Sunday School there is a coffee hour in the fellowship hall. People greet visitors and draw them into the church family, and tell them about the Sunday School classes to get them to attend one. Weather permitting, we open the front doors in the narthex wide to signify that everyone in the community is welcome at Bethany. There are materials available that explain what Bethany is and does, and how we want everyone to know the love, hope and peace that Jesus provides. Sometimes during the coffee hour the children perform educational skits, and sometimes one of the Sunday School teachers talks for a few minutes about what the lesson will be in his or her class that morning. It is an enjoyable hour for all, and has contributed to the increased attendance at Sunday School.

As an extension of Sunday School, we have Bible Study every Wednesday night. Our Bible Study classes began with the study of Genesis with the goal of studying each book of the Bible in order. These classes are led by several people who use a variety of study aids and teaching methods, and they are so compelling that people outside Bethany regularly attend, and as a result of their attendance at Bible Study, several also have come to the Sunday School classes.

Because we realized that revivals are not just worship services, but an opportunity for Christian education, we plan annual revivals in coordination with the worship program and the music program, and our Sunday School teachers and Bible Study leaders create special lessons and study programs leading up to each revival, using an integrated approach that has worked well both to attract people to the revivals and to make the revivals more dynamic events.

Finally, because our library, which has a wealth of resources, was underused, we started an ongoing project to clean up, classify and index books, other media and materials in order to make it easier for anyone to use. Although many in the congregation now use the library, the most frequent users are the Sunday School teachers and Bible Study leaders, who have found the resources in the library to be very helpful in their lesson plans. The teachers and leaders also meet regularly in the library to keep each other informed about their lessons and study plans and to exchange ideas.

With the new emphasis on Christian Education— putting Christ at the center of our lives— we finally have created a learning and study environment that makes people more comfortable and interested in learning about Christ, and makes it an adventure for our youth.

Outreach

After we learn about Christ, we must put what we learn into practice. One way we do that is by reaching out to those who are in need and those who don't know the love and compassion of Christ. We do this in many ways through our Outreach programs.

OUTREACH – We serve Him according to his word: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” *We use our resources for those in our community who want to be part of a church family and the body of Christ, and we find ways to reach and help people whose lives need to be touched by Christ.*

Before we began our two year process of transformation, we already had many successful outreach programs that we continue to support, including those of the general church, the Backpack Buddies ministry, Operation Veggie Box, Operation Christmas Child and military boxes, our card ministry, and others. These ministries grow every year to reach many members of our community and to bring in new faces to our church. Our card ministry also has expanded so we send cards to the visitors who sign in each Sunday.

In the prayer triad meetings there were a number of new ideas to reach out to people who need help or who do not know Christ. One of our new outreach ministries is a health care ministry that is overseen by a parish nurse that we got from the help of a grant. She helps by seeing some of our elderly church members if they have questions in between doctor's check-ups. During regularly scheduled weekly hours, she also sees community members who may have health questions or concerns. Many people who come to see her during the week attend church on Sundays.

Over the two year period, we also got a new part-time youth minister that we share with other Disciples of Christ churches in the county. The youth minister helps engage our youth while teaching them stories of the Bible through interactive skits and hands-on learning activities. The youth from the other Disciples churches come to our church for youth meetings whenever the youth minister is here and our youth go to the other churches to have more opportunities to learn about God. This sharing helped to create closer relationships between our congregation and the other local Disciples churches.

As our county is prone to hurricane disasters, we decided to prepare disaster relief kits including toiletries, flashlights, and other items that will aid families whose homes are damaged or destroyed by fire or natural disasters. Because they were pre-packaged and ready for distribution immediately, we were able to provide several families with prompt assistance after fires and other events. The families were very appreciative, and by helping them we showed them the love of Christ.

To try to get people from the community interested in attending our church, we started having an open house/coffee hour one Saturday every two months. The bell choir, chancel choir and gospel choir perform some pieces and the youth give examples of the Bible stories that they have learned. These open houses have been well attended and usually bring visitors to church over the next few Sundays.

To help us connect better with God, our community and each other, we also instituted several new programs that are open to the public. We have an exercise class to help the congregation and the community commit to wellness. We have a meditation program to help with stress relief and to draw closer to God by trying to seek his will in quiet contemplation. Also in cooperation with other churches, we offered to Hispanics and other non-English speaking residents English language lessons with a twist: rather than formal English, we offered a focus on colloquial English in order for English-as-second-language users to better understand English as locally spoken. By ministering to their special needs we are showing them the love of Christ and including them in our community.

The church also has leadership classes for members of the church who are elders and deacons or will be taking on a leadership role to help them be better prepared for what that role entails. These classes are open to members of our neighbor churches and many have benefitted from the chance to learn about ways to be better leaders in their respective congregations.

In addition to the Bible study that we offer, we also started a series of guest speakers to come in and speak on a biblical topic to enhance our understanding of the Bible. We also have once a month times scheduled for prayer vigils. The church is opened to people from the community to come and have time for prayer and reflection. We have also reinstated an Annual Revival with guest preachers and singing groups. Our own choirs also perform throughout the weeklong revival. Not only do the revivals bring many people into our church, but they brought many people to Christ, as we had several people make the confession of faith at the end of the revival time.

Also, in order to spread the word about our church, some volunteers helped to create a church brochure that we posted in different places throughout Pamlico County. We also started publishing a monthly calendar that we distribute to visitors and the congregation so we can keep

them informed about what is happening in the life of the church ó youth events, Harvest Dinner, etc.

As outreach and evangelism are inextricably entwined, our evangelism programs are part of our outreach. So the "Touch One Life," the "Forgiven Ministry," "Disciples 101 Training," "Tennis Shoes for Christ," and the "Bethany Prayer Ministry" all are part of our outreach effort.

As we progress in transformation to do the will of Christ, and grow in our own faith, we are finding our focus in outreach and reaching people with the Good News of Christ more certainly and more effectively. We are becoming "fishers of men."

Leadership

To keep us focused on our mission to be “fishers of men,” we must have able leaders to guide and direct us on our journey. Church leaders come from people of all ages and abilities, starting with our youth.

LEADERSHIP – We practice the love of Christ toward everyone because we love Christ: *All of us are ministers who lead by example and others can see the Holy Spirit working through us. We participate regularly in worship services and church life activities. Elders encourage other members of the congregation to visit the sick and shut-ins with them. Leadership training is available to all, and all are encouraged to become church leaders.*

Christ, in telling us to go into the world and teach all nations what he has commanded us, made us “fishers of men.” Ephesians 4 tells us that “each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” In Ephesians we are told that when Christ ascended, he gave us gifts:

¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.

We all, even the children, are “Fishers of Men,” according to our own gifts.

Acts 15:6: “The apostles and the elders met together.” Acts 15:22: “Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.”

One of our best leadership resources is our elders. From Acts and other New Testament scripture we know that elders served in the role of church leadership. Some even served in “pastor” roles. So we asked our elders to take a more active role in the church’s spiritual and administrative leadership, particularly in the role of “feeding our flock.” Through a more active shepherding program, an initiative including creating a planning calendar to help people know what’s coming up to help plan Bible study, leadership training and other spiritual programs within the church, and becoming faithful advisors to the general board, our elders have contributed greatly to a renewed spirit, sense of mission and enthusiasm among our congregation.

Although the duties of deacons primarily involve service, they have provided significant leadership over the last two years by taking their responsibilities seriously, including attendance at worship services and other church functions, taking an active part in the work of the general

board, and contributing their time and talents in other ways as well. Their dedicated service has increased attendance at worship and helped to make the work of the board more proactive and meaningful. In short, they have led by example, fulfilling their commitment to Christ.

Also, we began two years ago to look for suitable leadership training programs. There literally are hundreds available, but the best one seemed to be how Jesus trained His disciples for leadership:

- Jesus spent time observing potential leaders - He spent time interacting with potential leaders in a variety of situations before tapping them for further development.
- Jesus handpicked his leaders - No one self-selected into his group. Anyone could follow Jesus, but his inner circle was by invitation only.
- Jesus taught leadership along the way - Rather than classrooms, books, and exercises, Jesus used birds and lilies and farms to teach leadership. Leadership development was a natural outgrowth of hanging out together.
- Jesus put his students into difficult leadership situations - He constantly challenged them to lead beyond their comfort zones. (How are you going to feed the crowd? Walk on water. Go do miracles.)
- Jesus did not give his students a leadership template to follow; he gave them a mission to complete - His final leadership instruction was to Go make disciples. He left the how, where, and when completely up to them.
- Jesus taught in public; he debriefed in private - He often debriefed his public sermons in private with his students. They learned as much from the Q&A as they did from the original content.
- Jesus treated each leader as an individual - He confronted Peter, he loved John, and he challenged Thomas. In his final words on the beach in John 21, he told Peter that everyone has their own, individualized path to leadership.
- Jesus never kicked a leader out - He challenged and corrected his students, but he never excommunicated them. Even Judas left on his own.
- Jesus spent three years developing 12 men - He apparently couldn't come up with a mass program of microwave leadership development. Not only did his program take three years with 12 students, but it was 24/7/365. (www.churchleaders.com, *Leadership Training Doesn't Work*, by Geoff Surratt.)

Jesus trained his disciples over a three-year period, a long time for a church leadership training program. We concluded that to a large extent we must depend on those who have the natural talent for leadership to step up and contribute their talents. That also meant that we had to pay particular attention to find those with leadership talent and ask them to serve their congregation.

We concluded that even though one may have a natural talent for leadership, that person could benefit from going through a leadership training program that embodied to the extent possible Jesus' principles as explained in Surratt's points, just to help him or her with the mechanics of leadership. Also we found that leadership training is useful in identifying those that have leadership talents, so we set up periodic leadership training programs, both spiritual and administrative, and encouraged those in the congregation to participate. As a result, we now have several people who have committed to leadership roles within the church, and who, because of the leadership training classes, find it easier to transition to those roles and perform more effectively than they might have otherwise.

A more far-reaching plan was developed to start youth training for leadership in the church. We began by inviting the youth to attend board meetings, elders meetings, diaconate meetings, CMF, CWF, and committee meetings so they could see how the church worked both spiritually and administratively. In addition, the elders encouraged several of the youth to join them in their monthly visitations so they could see how members of the congregation minister to each other.

We found ways of making leadership interesting to the youth, including mock board meetings, mock elders meetings, etc., and giving them hypothetical issues in each of those types of meetings to try to conclude and resolve, using applicable scripture as the basis.

Several of the youth found leadership training to be especially interesting and they enjoyed the challenges it presented. They are now positioned to become effective church leaders.

The emphasis on leadership was part of the overall attempt to get members of the congregation to contribute their individual talents and abilities to helping Bethany better fulfill its mission to be "fishers of men." Consequently, we now enjoy stronger leadership that is more sensitive to the life and mission of the church.

Worship

We teach people about Jesus, reach out like Jesus taught us to do to those who need help, and grow strong leaders in our congregation. But we don't just tell about Jesus, we worship Him to show Him our love and gratitude for His sacrifice to save us.

WORSHIP – We worship him gladly and joyfully as our Lord and Savior: *The Holy Bible is our guide and the Holy Spirit is our inspiration. We are excited about attending worship services and tithing, not out of obligation, but because of our love for the Lord. We see ourselves as a ministry team contributing our talents to different aspects of church life. Our music and services include a broad range of styles designed to provide spiritual food for everyone, all contributing to the reverent, but joyful, worship of our God. The pastor’s messages are taught from the Word of God and reach out to the lost and hurting, leading them to a relationship with Jesus Christ.*

Our worship emphasizes the values that we, as Disciples, hold dear: the love of God, the knowledge that Christ is the son of the Living God and is our Lord and Savior, communion every Sunday and spreading the Gospel.

To signify to the community that Bethany is a welcoming church where all are invited, we began opening the front doors and the doors by the parking lot with greeters stationed at the door to welcome those arriving. We resumed having a brief greeting time after the announcements before the worship service starts so everyone can greet and welcome people.

In order for people to be more involved in the worship service, we began using volunteer lay members, including children and youth, to be responsible for parts of the service like announcements, reading scripture text, etc.)

We gave more responsibility to children and youth in the worship service by asking them to participate in a number of ways like singing songs they learned in children’s church or performing skits about what they learned in Sunday School, to demonstrate what they have learned in our Christian Education program.

Recognizing that people learn and react differently, some to sound cues and some to visual ones, we found ways of integrating the audio-visual equipment more, making everything more interactive. Occasionally videos that go along with the message are projected on the screen. Sometimes music to accompany the children’s message is played through the sound system.

So that those who could not be at the worship service could participate, we began recording the services on a DVD and duplicating the disks to send to them. Sometimes our elders take them on their visits, and other times the disks are mailed.

Even before we began the journey of transformation, the music ministry began to enhance our worship experience, and over the past two years has brought many visitors to the church. Each group—the bell choir, chancel choir and gospel choir—is a vital part of the worship service. Music from one of the groups each week is used to set the tone for our worship services, engaging the congregation and preparing them to meet God and focus on Him. Our music leaders have found new ways to use music in our worship services and in other meetings and events, leading to an expanded music ministry that has benefited our congregation and the community.

Our minister has found new ways to get the message to us each week by incorporating a multi-media approach to encourage spiritual growth in the congregation and feed the spirit, giving us strength for each work week.

Now, not only does the regular worship draw visitors, but the new early service to accompany the coffee hour brings in people who may not be able to attend the midday service. This service is more informal, with music as the central part of worship. People who staying for the midday service and Sunday School are free to move in and out of the early worship to partake in the coffee hour and select their Sunday School class for the day.

We began using other venues for worship services. In the spring and summer months, we hold several Sunday worship services under our pavilion to offer variety and draw people from the community. We also offer some services at Camp Caroline's outdoor worship area, which bring in people who are taking their children to camp or picking them up, and we held some services at Kennel's Beach in conjunction with the Sunday School program there.

Our worship services now offer options to those who can't attend one or the other, but each helps us grow in faith, and they have provoked those who attend to think and talk about what they experienced and learned during the week. Worship now serves our community, bringing in more visitors, some of whom have joined our church family.

Evangelism

Christian Education, Outreach, Leadership and Worship all help us to do God's will. Jesus said, "No one comes to the Father but by me." When we accept Christ as our savior and live according to his word, we are saved by His grace. We who are saved know where we are going. But Christ wants us to tell everyone so all may be saved. That is all part of our great mission: To personally and as a church share the Good News of Jesus Christ and make disciples!

EVANGELISM – We make disciples: *We don't keep to ourselves; we go out and share God's love and grace with everyone we encounter. We do this by being ourselves – people for whom Christ is the center of our lives, and whom the Holy Spirit enables to do what Christ wants us to do.*

The gospel is the message that we are all separated from God because of our sin. The result of this sin is emptiness, an ever-present guilt, something that can ruin one's life. Yet, because God loved us, in spite of our rebellion, He sent His own Son to die in our place and to bridge the gap between Him and ourselves.

This was the Gospel of Jesus Christ that needed to be told to friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, and the world. We had become stale and needed a fresh start, a new touch from God to get back to sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in ways that would produce fruit. When the church made a commitment to put Jesus in the center of our lives, we knew with the power of His strength our goals could be realized.

Disciples of Christ – The mission of the Christian Church is “To be and to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, witnessing, loving, and serving from our doorsteps to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

God wanted us to share our faith as often as possible because time is running out. Thousands slip into eternity every day without putting their faith in Jesus Christ and without repenting of their sins. Through training, prayer, and Bible study, we found opportunities to share God's love and grace with those whom we encountered, and the Holy Spirit enabled us to do what Christ wanted us to do. We looked for new ways to become "fishers of men," to share the Good News and bring people to Christ.

Touch one life in 2013 with the Good News of Jesus Christ training through the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association provided resources, videos; download resources, and articles to help us share our faith. This training was very effective. By using this training, we were able to reach a number of people who now have accepted Jesus as their personal savior, several of whom have joined Bethany, and others now attend other churches.

Forgiven Ministry - *I was in prison and you visited me...Matthew 25:36.* We volunteered with the "Forgiven Ministry" which brings the Good News of God's love and forgiveness to those behind bars in the Pamlico Correctional Facility. The ministry

provides a program to offer hope and love where hopelessness and despair prevail. As God transformed people throughout the program, counselors were ready to share with any inmate that came forward during the invitation. Many have come to accept Jesus as their Savior.

Disciples 101 Training -We created multiple training opportunities over the course of a year, because one time was not enough. In a one-day seminar entitled "What if discussing your faith was a normal, everyday thing?" we learned how to speak naturally about our faith experience and to speak with confidence with our friends. In the spring, each year for the past two years, we held a retreat at Camp Caroline for local churches to come together as a community to fellowship and share ideas on different methods to reach the lost in Pamlico County. This time together brought unity and rekindled love for the lost in our community.

We became involved in a new program entitled "Tennis Shoes for Christ" in which people began to walk through our county talking with everyone about Christ. Seeds were planted in many hearts as questions were asked about Jesus, and many that were invited to attend church came.

Bethany's Prayer Ministry was started to pray for hearts across America that needed to hear the Gospel. We started with two to three names of family, friends, and neighbors who needed Jesus Christ and His hope, knowing God would bring more to our mind as we prayed. We printed our list and prayed for them every day and built a strong relationship with them. Monthly we invited them into our homes to hear a special message or watch a video on salvation.

While forming relationships with those with whom we came into contact may not sound like a strategy, it has turned out to be one of the most effective means of evangelizing. Through these relationships, over time, people could see what defines our lives and how we respond to daily circumstances in a Christian manner. Trust was built and we could speak freely about our faith. The best part of sharing Christ with people in this manner is that a relationship already is in place, so it positions us to disciple them once they come to faith.

We prayed for the spiritual status of people whom we knew were not professing Christians, invited un-churched people to attend a church service or program, and became comfortable in

sharing our beliefs concerning Christ effectively. As we prayed for others, our own spiritual lives were strengthened and we grew in our knowledge of Christ.

As Christ wants us to do, we became fishers of men, and in so doing, our own faith grew and we brought people to Christ.