

Gripped by the Gospel of Grace: David Short's talk on vision at the St. John's annual general meeting

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] Well now my hope is that included in the package is the annual report and I don't have it in front of me the package but if you would turn to the very long letter that I wrote in that report that you've all read very carefully on pages four to nine in my report and I'm really going to focus on the diagram at the end of my letter.

The focus of what I'm going to be talking about tonight is the vision but let me speak a little bit about our last 12 months.

I think it's been a year of stabilizing and finding our feet in a new building. There's been graciously lent to us by the Oak Ridge Assembly and there's been a strong sense that we want to find a way forward together and just so you know our overall attendance over the last 12 months is about the same as our overall Sunday attendance for the year before about 800 people but the evening service has grown and you can make your own deductions about that.

We thank God for the provision of this building and for the financial generosity, your financial generosity and God's kindness to us that this year we paid off the transition expense and met all our other expenses.

We also engaged in a vision process and I'm very grateful to everyone for working through this in groups and in public meetings and for your patience with me as I come up to speed with it.

[2 : 14] Very interesting reading all the responses. People, the feedback is people want to stay together as one church and we want a permanent home. But there's lots of questions that people have in their minds.

Why aren't we changing faster? Why can't we just stay the same? Is the rector okay? My wife has had that question for a long time.

Is there anyone who's thinking about a new building? What do we do with the last 10 years? Do we just forget it and turn our backs on it? Does God have a future for us?

How should we grow? And the picture I've used about this is it feels as though St. John's is like a big two-mastered ship that has entered the rapids for a while and we're banged about by this narrow concourse that we've been through and we've come out onto a new area of water and we're a little bit the worse for wear.

So what I want to do is talk with you about the vision and I want to talk about a shift in the way we think about ourselves because I've had a shift in understanding.

[3 : 27] In our troubles with the Diocese of New Westminster over the last decade and our need to step aside from the Anglican Church of Canada, this was not just a purely theological issue I've come to see but it was a basic disagreement on how we as Christians and as a church should relate to the culture round about us.

There's a tremendous sense I think that our culture has moved and continues to move in a post-Christian direction, in a pluralist direction. And in pluralist cultures churches tend to do two very opposite things.

The pious response is to withdraw from the culture, to protect ourselves, to be inward focused and self-protective, to set up walls, not to take risks and I think that leads to a sort of inertia.

The opposite response, and I'm generalising here, is just to go with the flow, to surrender to the culture round about, to try and change both the forms of our gatherings as well as the gospel, adapt the gospel to the culture round about.

And you can see this in desperate attempts by churches to be relevant. As I have stepped back onto the deck, I like the ship picture, and I was going to draw some diagrams tonight, but one of the trustees told me stick with PowerPoint and let a five-year-old do it for you.

[4 : 59] So, as I've understood and taken back the role of rector, I think our danger is the first. Our danger is to be inward.

We spend so much time defining ourselves and being clear about who we are in opposition to something. And I think we are in danger of thinking of ourselves, being inwardly focused, while Vancouver may go to hell, by being defined by a crisis and not by Christ.

This is a very important shift in thinking. In pluralist cultures, we need to both hold to the sound doctrine, to the gospel, and engage in the culture in which we live.

We both need to hold the gospel and hold out the gospel. And who we are as a church community becomes even more important. Like the strategy of God in the island of Crete, we need to teach the eternal gospel, we need to embody and adorn the eternal gospel, and we need to be a community of contrast.

So, in a sense, the way that God has led me, and I hope us, in this visioning process is to refresh and to renew our missionary identity here in Vancouver.

[6 : 22] And that can only come from the gospel. What is it that gives us faith? The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all. What is it that gives us hope?

We wait for the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. What is it that enables us to love one another? It's the gospel.

He gave himself to redeem from all lawlessness and purify a people zealous for good works. So, put most simply, I dream, my vision for St. John's Vancouver is that we would be a community of contrast, gripped by the gospel of grace.

And you say, that sounds very fine. What does that mean? What does it look like? Well, the diagram, I hope it's in your package. I want to just speak about that diagram for a couple of minutes.

I believe that we are engaged on four ministry fronts, or four ministry areas. They're not separate from each other, they're related. And of course, it all comes from God, and Jesus Christ, through his spirit, is the centre of our life as a congregation.

[7 : 40] But each of these ministry, each of these four areas of ministry, has both an inward focus on the church community, and an outward focus on the city roundabouts.

And the first is worship and evangelism. Worship and evangelism. They're not very far from each other. We say, on communion Sundays with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we lord and magnify thy glorious name, evermore praising thee and saying, holy, holy, holy together.

Lord God of hosts, heaven and earth are filled with thy glory. Glory be to thee, O Lord most high. When we gather and proclaim God's praise, it's not a small thing we're doing.

We join all of heaven in speaking the truth about what's going on in the universe. And in the long essay I wrote, I picked up some of the New Testament teaching that tells us that Jesus Christ himself, the risen Jesus, when his people gather and lift up God's name, Jesus is in their midst, proclaiming the great name of God his Father.

Now, I know we come to church with all sorts of things on our mind, but when we gather here together, whenever we gather with other Christians, there's something very large going on.

[9 : 10] And when Jesus tells the greatness of God, he's not just telling it in the congregation, he's telling it not just to us, but to the nations.

So our worship and our evangelism needs to have both an inward and an outward focus. What do I mean? When Archbishop Cramner reformed the Archbishop of Canterbury, under whom the Reformation really took shape, when he wrote the Book of Common Prayer, he reformed the services along the lines which made them much closer to the New Testament thinking.

And part of his genius was to understand that God expects non-Christians to be present in our gatherings, and that both the words and the forms of worship that we use are intelligible, authentic.

We communicate the truth graciously and engagingly. And the New Testament says if that happens, then those who are outsiders will fall under conviction and believe.

And I would love to teach about mere Anglicanism. I can't do it tonight. It's going to take a long time. But in terms of just this area, if you look back in your report under worship and evangelism, at the end of that section, I've articulated five principles which Archbishop Cramner used in reforming the worship of the Anglican Church that remain just as true for us as they were then.

[10 : 48] And when I get to teaching mere Anglicanism, I'm going to go through them in more detail. Do you want me to make a comment about each of them? Our worship is God-centered.

It's a response to what God's done. It's not me-centered. It's participatory. This is one of the great things about being Anglican. We're forced to get up and get down and speak and say the promises of God to each other and rehearse the creed and versicles and responses.

We don't come as consumers. We come as participants. They are gospel-shaped. There's a very wonderful process through which the services take us through repentance and sin and faith and grace declared.

They need to be comprehensible in a language that's accessible. And we magnify God. And under that, Cramner's phrase is to set forth his praise with all that we are, using all our art and skill and music and ability.

Because the gatherings need to be not only God-honoring and Christ-centered, but they need to be a container for us when we are in deep grief or in great joy.

[12 : 16] And I believe they are. So when I worship in evangelism, this is my prayer that we would come to think of this as something absolutely central, vital, and essential week by week to each of us.

That's my dream. And my dream is that we would continue to reform along the lines of these five principles. But I also have a nightmare. And my nightmare is this, that our worship would be formal and correct, but dead and inauthentic.

That people would come once or twice a month when they feel like coming, and that when they come, they never remain and really engage and talk and never connect beyond the gathering.

That's my nightmare. But we'll stick with the vision, okay? Now, the other three areas, if you look back at the diagram, there are six arrows.

On the left is an arrow for faith. And there's an inward aspect of faith, growing in faith. And there's an outward, faith in action. There's an inward aspect to hope and an outward, and love as well.

[13 : 29] So let me talk about faith, growing in faith. Under growing in faith, I would consider all our Bible teaching ministries and our practical discipleship ministries.

This happens in all sorts of forms outside the gathering. Currently, we have around 600 people meeting in small groups during the week, study God's word, have fellowship together.

That's about 75% of those who come on Sunday. Evening service now has a new children's ministry, which people are enjoying. Our youth ministry initiated combined church gatherings.

And a few weeks ago, there were 200 kids at the Hollywood Theater from different churches. The vision is that our small groups would become more than just Bible studies. They would become places where we care and love and grow and are transformed together.

They would have a comprehensive, lifelong formation in the gospel in a variety of different places, in a variety of different formats. And that each member is able to find a place for real life change and that the leaders of those groups are equipped, hungry and humble before the gospel.

[14 : 41] Faith in action, outwardly. I think this is an area we don't do so well. If discipleship means all of life, it must not be confined to the Christian corners of life.

My hope is that we can grow to support and equip one another so that we see our whole lives, what we do six days a week, and all our networks through the lens of the gospel.

We'll integrate our faith in our work, for example. There are many people, many members of St. John's, who are uniquely engaging culture for Christ in all sorts of very interesting ways.

But we don't know about it. And I want to find a way that we can celebrate it and support each other together to think through and engage, how do we do this?

So that as disciples we won't just, you know, sign over our lives to the company, that our lives are not about climbing the corporate ladder or getting the largest portfolio.

[15 : 46] But because we're Christians, we bring a distinctive motivation and a distinctive view of work than those around us. We believe that work is important to God and that God is important to work.

That's what I mean by faith in action, outwardly. And I have a nightmare here as well. Do you want to hear it? Well, a nightmare is that people become Christians and then stop, stop growing and remain there for the rest of their lives without changing.

And they get themselves into the embarrassing place where they feel they're fumbling around and there's no openness or place for them to express questions. Or that we become one day Christians, not thinking Christianly about our work or our family or our money, a little embarrassed about the gospel.

That's my nightmare. Faith. Let's move next to hope. Faith, hope and love. I think hope is in short supply in Vancouver.

I think we're in a culture where there is not a lot of hope. And we are dual citizens, brothers and sisters, because the gospel brings us into eternal life.

[17 : 04] And what that does is it makes us lean toward the future with a certain confidence. It means that we're able to invest our lives for Christ and for his glory. We don't need to serve the idols of individualism or materialism or consumerism.

But our lives, if they are hopeful, will be marked by thoughtful thankfulness, a sense of gratitude, graceful generosity, financial and personal generosity, and patient prayer.

I think the last 10 years, God has demonstrated his great kindness and faithfulness to us. And we of all congregations ought to be the most thankful and the least complaining.

And I have seen prayer grow amongst us. There are now a whole range of options for people to pray. Keeping company with God, Monday evenings, our morning prayer services during the week, our quarterly family prayer gatherings, and people to pray, teams to pray with us after the service.

And I think in this area, moving forward, my hope is that stewardship would not be reactive as we have tended to do it, but be part of our regular teaching.

[18 : 25] That's my aim. What do I mean by hope in action? Well, one of the things that we discerned during the crisis, I remember this was very early on, one of our public meetings.

We had this great sense that God had given us, at St. John's, a role to resource and bless other congregations. You remember? So that one of the controlling principles in all our decisions through the crisis was, what can we do that will be most beneficial for our other brothers and sisters, Anglicans, and we were the beneficiaries of other brothers and sisters caring for us.

By hope in action, I mean bringing the blessing of God, bringing the hope of God to those outside of St. John's, and this is a very large and significant part of St. John's, Vancouver.

Do you know we spend a third of our budget in this area trying to bring the blessing of God to others? Through our mission giving and our relationships with Malawi and the Diocese of Upashire, through Helping Point in India and a team that went this last year, through Ratanac.

This year we graduate six Artizo graduates for ministry positions, hopefully across Canada. In Vancouver, we support Lighthouse, Harbour Ministries, Living Waters, the Intervarsity Fellowship with Susan Norman, UBC.

[19 : 56] And I understand that our website had 50,000 visitors last year. It sounds like a lot, but I'm not sure it is. We've also tried to be responsive in church planting.

It's a very interesting area because years ago, we sought to take the initiative in this and be strategic.

But actually God has taken the initiative with this and he's given us the opportunity to join him. Now we did initiate St. John's Richmond and that congregation is a stable, growing congregation, healthy, reaching out in Richmond.

We responded and St. John's Surrey, the Sudanese congregation, was planted. But I understand they're struggling. This last year, Christ the Redeemer, Farsi Church, with the Shafgats in North Vancouver, is going ahead.

And we're looking to endorse and partner with St. Peter's Fireside, downtown, right here in downtown Vancouver, which is going to meet in Robson Square.

[21 : 04] This is going to be an Anglican church plant in the heart of the city. And it's a chance for us as a congregation to be another sending congregation to partner with Alistair and Julia Stern.

And on Sunday, you're going to hear more about this. And over the next months, chances to be involved. I have a nightmare about this too, but I'm not going to tell you about it. I'm just going to move straight on.

You've got enough of my nightmares. And the final area is love. And within the community, serving in love. And of course, currently we have a number of programs that pastoral care, divorce care, and grief share, and living waters, and Stephen Ministries.

And these are all part of being a community of contrast. Here we are. We live in Vancouver. This is a lonely city. People feel disconnected and uninvolved and suspicious.

But my question to us is, do we really love one another? You know, the heart of a growing church, the reason people come and come back to a church is that they're loved.

[22 : 19] And we could have fabulous programs and people and prayer and preaching and all that sort of stuff, but without love, we just sound like a clanging, empty nothing. And we can have the best worship and evangelism and faith and hope, but without love, we are nothing.

And we can endure a crisis of 10 years and make costly decisions, but if we don't have love, we gain absolutely nothing. And of all the things I speak about tonight, I beg you, please, to pray about this, that we would love one another.

Finally, in Love in Action, this is an intentional outward focus. It's my view we're called to serve the city here in Vancouver, and there are many people involved in serving the city in all sorts of different ways.

But I think we need to discern together as a congregation, and all of these will need your involvement in different ways to become a signpost and a lighthouse to increase our visibility and our footprint.

And to do all of this is completely impossible, apart from the goodness and tender mercy of God. To do it, we, the leadership, believe we will need a new ministry home, but someone's going to speak to that just a little later.

[23 : 47] I'm not talking about adding thousands of programs, I'm talking about just a shift in the way we think about ourselves, so that we're a community of contrast, gripped by the gospel of God's grace in our worship and evangelism, in our faith and our hope and our love, both inside and outside the congregation.