

On Sunday, October 1, 2006 the Laurel elders talked with the congregation about "Sharpening our Vision." The transcript of that message is below:

Good morning. The voices you will hear this morning are Anthony Fuller's and my voices, but please hear the hearts of all the elders, because Anthony and I come to you this morning on behalf of Don Chandler, Phil Coleman, and Leland Dugger, as well as ourselves.

It is a great honor, an awesome responsibility, usually a great pleasure, and, sometimes, a considerable challenge to serve as your elders here at Laurel. We first want to thank you for that opportunity.

What we have to say today is not exactly a "sermon." Laurel is a family, and we want this to be more a "family talk" than a sermon. There will be a little repetition for those of you who come to our First Sunday night congregational meetings, but we wanted to talk to as many Laurel members as possible, so we decided to take this Sunday morning for that purpose. Visitors, you are most welcome here. We hope you will come back and hear a real sermon. But today, you are invited to listen in to our family talk.

In a way it seems that the past couple of years at Laurel have been particularly stressful and challenging; but if you think back over Laurel's history, look at other congregations, consider Restoration history as well as more general church history, and even consider churches we read about in the New Testament, there have always been ebb and flow of problems and situations. So, perhaps our past couple of years are not so atypical. And we do know that God works in all things for the good of those who love Him. In any case, we believe that MUCH good has come and continues to come from this great church. We are a family, and that is worthy of celebration, and thanksgiving.

As we began this period without a pulpit minister, it was decided that we should "step back" and consider our "vision" for Laurel's future. It was discussed that to reach that "vision," we needed to first consider our "identity" – Where have we come from? Who are we? What specific, sometimes unique, gifts and opportunities has God given us, and what special challenges has He set before us? Those make up our "IDENTITY."

Next, in arriving at our "vision," we needed to clarify our "mission." Of course we know that our mission is given to us in the New Testament (great commission & others). But, given our specific characteristics and identity, what should we be working to accomplish? What does the world need from us? What does God want from us? So we prayed, and thought, and put into words what we hope is now a very familiar "Mission Statement." That statement is this: "***The mission of the Laurel church of Christ is to be Christ's body, making a positive eternal difference in the lives of all who come our way, and all to whom we are sent.***" Notice that there are three parts to this statement, based on our identity: (1) We are a body, Christ's body – a family under Jesus as head. (2) We are a sort of "way station." Countless people come THROUGH Laurel. Our own children come through en route to adulthood; others pass through en route to education, to careers, to international experiences and other destinations. Some stay, but many come and go and we need to make a difference in their lives while they are here. And (3) we have long been and must continue to be a mission-minded and mission focused church. The Great Commission is to go into all the world... It is our mission to be Christ's body, making a positive eternal difference in the lives of those who come our way, and those to whom we are sent.

Finally, in pursuing our vision, in addition to identity and mission, we needed "implementation." What should we do? What should we not do? What should we change and not change? How can we get all of Christ's "body parts" at Laurel (that's all of US) involved and working together to start where we are, effectively pursue our mission, and to attain our "vision?" We needed "implementation."

Well, we fairly quickly worked through "identity," and enunciated a "mission statement," but we haven't done as well on "implementation."

Why have we slowed at implementing our vision? There are probably lots of reasons. Here are some we feel apply:

1. First, we all have been quite occupied with searching for a preacher. Some have felt, some have said, and some have acted as if we really can't move ahead until we get a preacher. We certainly do agree that we need the continuity, stability, and the leadership of a full-time pulpit minister. But we also think that the lessons presented by the men of this congregation during this time have been great, and we are thankful for every one of them. The search for the right pulpit minister continues... and, in fact, that search is partly the reason for this talk, as you will see.
2. Another reason we have somewhat stalled at implementing our vision is that we have gotten focused on a number of "issues" that seem to be pervasive in churches, most all churches. These issues generally focus on pushes for change vs. resistance to change. We will get to some of these issues later.
3. We may have paused at implementation because, while we read and OK'd the words of our Mission Statement, perhaps we really never studied it, prayed about it, understood it, internalized it, committed to it, and determined to do our respective parts to pursue it. The elders believe this is a good mission statement. We believe that if we can be Christ's body, and if we can make eternal positive differences in the lives of those who come to us and those to whom God sends us (which obviously involves introducing them to Jesus), God will be pleased and glorified – and that is our goal.

4. Another reason we have struggled with implementation is that, as the old saying goes, “the Devil is in the details.” It’s easier to envision and plan than to DO. It’s easier to envision and plan than to answer the detailed “What” and “How” questions. It’s easy to agree on generalities of tomorrow, but what about the details of today? What about right now?
5. Finally, we have probably slowed at implementation more than at identity and mission because in implementation is where the WORK is. We think and we dream and we philosophize well, but in implementation there is study, and prayer, and work, and determination, and endurance, and cooperation ... and submission.

We know our identity. We know our mission. We need to get on with it.

I want to take a little diversion here and say more about Laurel being a “body” – a “family.” Months ago when we were prayerfully working on our vision for Laurel, we were led to the conclusion that Laurel should be a “ONE CIRCLE church.” That term came from sketches we were making at a meeting in Anthony’s den one Saturday morning. We drew one circle representing those who want to be (for lack of a better term) “traditional,” and another circle representing those who want to be more “progressive.” Then we drew the circles in different configurations. One option had the circles separating and separated from each other – each group “getting their way” within their circle. Then we drew the circles with varying degrees of “overlap,” indicating that maybe we could send missionaries together, and give to the poor together, and certainly eat – together. But perhaps we would have to worship and do some other things separately, because of our different preferences – hence the overlapping circles – partly together, partly separate. As you know, many congregations take exactly those routes. Some have completely split, others have practically split but still occupy the same building and do some things together.

As we drew the two circles in various configurations, we realized and acknowledged that it would be a tougher course, but we agreed that what we wanted, and what we perceived would be most pleasing to God, was for Laurel to be a “one circle” church. TOUGH, but for one thing, we reasoned that in the New Testament God obviously wanted Jews and Gentiles to be one church. If the Jews and Gentiles of that day could do it, SURELY we could! We have tried to keep our sights and this church on that course – a “one circle” church. It is our perception that, while certainly not perfect, Laurel has moved toward, not away from that unity and that one-circle goal. We think it’s time to recognize that, thank your for that, and celebrate that.

Over our recent past, a number of changes have been made. Some of you have thought there were too many changes and they came too fast. Others have thought the changes were too few, too small, and too slow. But thank God, and praise God, we are one body. We are family. We are still diverse, but we are “ONE.” In this recent past a few folks have left Laurel, for which we are very sorry. We love them, and we miss them. A small number left because of changes, and a few left because of lack of change. But WE are still here, we are ONE, we are growing – and we are family. Thank you... and thank God.

(SING SWEET, SWEET SPIRIT)

OK. Now back to what we need to do to accomplish our mission as a church... How do we “get on with it?” How do we get past the hurdles mentioned earlier – the pulpit ministry vacancy, the focus on issues, the lack of focus on our mission and how to pursue it?

Certainly we need to resolve our pulpit ministry vacancy. More than 150 candidates have been screened by our very busy and tired search committee. Most have clearly not been a good fit for Laurel. One was enthusiastically supported by everyone who met him and his family, but he took another job with which we could not possibly compete. There are at least 149 other reasons we are still looking. One reason that has come up with some recent promising candidates is their calling for clearer vision, or a “sharper focus” as to where we want to go as a church, and what their role will be in that future. So, today we talk about sharpening our focus and vision.

As mentioned earlier, Laurel, like other congregations, has been considerably focused on some issues. One promising candidate who visited here heard so much emphasis and so many questions and opinions about ONE of those issues, worship style, that he lost interest because style issues was not his ministry focus. Another candidate lost interest because of his perception (and it was a MIS-perception, by the way) of “where we are” on worship style.

So, some of our “issues” have affected implementation of our vision, and now are affecting our minister search. So, let’s look at some of the issues, and try to “sharpen our vision” somewhat...

#### What about worship style?

Our worship style has changed at Laurel over the past few years. We believe Mike Taylor has done a great job of bringing us now to a “blended” worship style. We sing new songs and old songs – praise songs, and hymns. A group of especially gifted singers works with Mike to learn new songs, usually ahead of the rest of us, and then those voices help us learn new songs, particularly at our 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday night devotionals and 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday singings. Mike and that team will soon join our Youth Group on

occasion and our UT students, as these young and enthusiastic Christians learn to sing even better and appreciate worship in song more.

We believe the main advantage of the vocal support team is to help us learn new songs... Once we learn a song here, our singing together is great! We believe Mike and the Team are a great help right now and we will continue this approach. Also, Mike and the Team are considering producing some tapes or CDs that each of us can use to learn new songs, and our parts, as we drive in our cars or as we focus on Jesus in our homes. Then, when we all come together to worship we can sing more enthusiastically and more thoughtfully. We appreciate Mike Taylor and we want him to continue his great work among us, not focused on putting a great singing group before us, but continuing to develop ALL of us into a great singing group to worship together before God.

Another worship style issue, though seemingly not a very controversial one here, is the use of visual aids, in addition to words, in some of our services. Jesus spoke in many parables – PICTURES he painted with His words. We have been using pictures here in projecting songs, God's word, and sometimes relevant educational or motivational situations. We have tried and will continue to try to have these be an aid and not a distraction. We want to continue and enhance our use of visual materials. We want to improve our ability to use them well when we are able to make the planned enhancements to our worship space.

#### What about women's roles at Laurel?

The women of our congregation are, generally, the most active, benevolent, caring, and evangelistic of our members. These are the qualities of Jesus. Women do and lead some of our most active and effective ministries. We believe, and believe that all of you agree, that gender does not make anyone more or less precious or valuable in God's sight or in His church. We believe that we all have equally valuable roles, equal access to Jesus and His Gospel, and the same eternal hope. That is what matters.

We also believe that God's word does distinguish between the roles He has given to men and women, in the family, and in the church family. We are fully aware that there are different interpretations and feelings about what those distinctions are, and frankly, we elders don't claim to have all the precise answers.

After a study of women's roles here a couple of years ago, some felt we were indecisive when we did not issue an exhaustive list of all the things men and women would and would not do at Laurel. We still do not think that would have been, nor would now be, the best approach. It would be an endless process, would keep the congregation's focus on issues, and would no doubt consume lots of time and energy answering questions no one is asking.

So, we repeat what we thought and said at that time. We believe God has given us all gifts and abilities for use in His service. We believe His word speaks to how we use those gifts and abilities. We believe God wants us all to use our gifts and abilities. And, we will continue to work as hard as we can with any member who comes to us, man or woman, to use their gifts and passions in God's service for the good of this congregation and for the good of God's broader kingdom.

#### What about instrumental music?

There are some differences of opinion among us on this issue. As was the case 100 years ago, the basic difference is our interpretation of silence of the scriptures. When things are not clearly specified in the Word, neither specifically commanded nor forbidden, does that constitute endorsement, or prohibition? Our brotherhood has long claimed that we "speak where the Bible speaks, and are silent where the Bible is silent." But some interpret silence as "yes," some as "no." Perhaps we should interpret silence... as silence. We do not find endorsement of instrumental music in the New Testament, so we will not endorse it. We do not find practice of instrumental music in the New Testament so, as we said at the end of our study on worship, we will not use instrumental music at Laurel. Not that this is our practice or personality at Laurel, but we also don't think it is useful and hope we won't be mean-spirited or seek to be condemning of those who interpret silence differently.

#### What about what is being called the "Unity Movement" among churches of Christ and Christian Churches?

As you probably know there are meetings and discussions going on involving members of the church of Christ, and the Christian Church. Such meetings are being held here in Knoxville at Johnson Bible College. We just talked about instrumental music, a key difference between the two groups. As we said, we don't endorse, nor will we practice, instrumental music at Laurel. But we know that the Bible does certainly endorse unity, and it does endorse communication and good relationships with people with whom we agree, and people with whom we do not agree on some matters. So, we endorse and are thankful for efforts at communication and scriptural unity. We are not endorsing all practices of the Christian Church, but will not discourage dialogue and communication, and scriptural unity.

History has taken us thru many "issues" – the number of cups to use in communion, whether or not we should have Sunday school classes, or eat together in the church building, or support orphan homes, and there are others. We hope what we have said on these few current issues helps clarify where we are and foresee going in these areas.

HOWEVER, though we felt we must talk some about these issues today, these issues, or other such issues, are NOT intended to be our focus today... nor the focus of the future of this congregation: QUITE THE CONTRARY. Primarily what we want

to say and do today IS to focus on changes, but NOT changes, and NOT status quo, as they relate to these or other such "issues." We believe, in fact, that it is time to get our focus off these issues, and instead to "sharpen our vision" and to "RE-focus" back onto implementing our mission. We believe this is the route to our unity and to our serving and glorifying God. It is time to change our emphasis from ISSUES to MISSION.

Now some of you may be disappointed that we do not today push ahead with more and faster changes. Others may be disappointed that neither do we turn the clock back to a time before many of the recent changes. But we feel we have reached a good balance at Laurel. You have probably noticed that new people, including lots of students and young couples, are joining us here at Laurel almost every week. We meet with each one before they become a member at Laurel and we are finding that they are not coming here because of style. Rather these great new people are telling us that they are coming because they have been warmly received here and because they sense that we are family here – and we ARE. What we are DOING here or NOT doing here now in terms of style, is not keeping these new folks away.

When the minister search committee (about 25 faithful Laurel members) were asked by one of the candidates to rate Laurel on a number of factors, by far the most positive response was that we are family here. We take care of each other. That is what God wants.

We are not here to declare a moratorium on all style changes, but rather to focus on what we are all about. We want our energy and excitement to be about our mission and about filling the world's need for the Gospel of Jesus, not about style. Some of our minister candidates have cited their success as a "change agent." Unfortunately, that term may have taken on a negative and a combative meaning. We WANT a "change agent" for a preacher. But we DON'T want someone with an agenda to change us from "traditional" to "progressive" OR from "progressive" to "traditional." We want to be both traditional and progressive – in the good sense of those words. We want to honor long-treasured traditions and the people who hold them. We also want to be progressive in that we want to make progress in functioning as Christ's body, and in serving, and teaching, and saving more of those who come our way and those to whom God sends us. We want a "change agent" to further transition us from consumers to servants. Servants are those who will be saved eternally (Matthew 25).

If we are not going to focus on "issues" in the months to come, what WILL we focus on? What will it take to really implement our vision? We have thought and prayed about that and have come up with SIX things that we feel need to be our emphases. Please know that we elders do not consider ourselves to have accomplished or perfected all these things. Part of the reason we feel Laurel needs these emphases is because WE need these in our lives. We feel that as we go forward our primary emphases should be to...

- Grow, and encourage each other to grow, in our personal relationships with Jesus
- Develop a hunger for knowledge, holiness, and service
- Grow in maturity and self-sacrifice – These are the path to unity because immature, selfish people cannot be united, but the mature and unselfish can.
- Involve ALL Laurel family members in the meaningful use of our gifts
- Create and encourage genuine fellowship so that no one is lonely or alone here
- Provide inspiring worship opportunities for all ages

You will see these emphases again and again. If we need change, these are the areas in which we most need it. We will ask our new pulpit minister to help us with these emphases. Until that new full-time person is found, the men who are already bringing us great lessons will be focusing on these emphases, based largely on the words of Jesus in His sermon on the mount. That will begin next Sunday morning.

This is a GREAT church. We have a great past and expect an even greater future. You are a key part of it. Be thankful for that. Celebrate that. And let's all get on with it!

We love you. We appreciate you. We hope this sharpens our focus some. We hope this changes our emphasis. We hope this tells our elusive minister candidate more about what we want from him. And we hope this calls EVERY ONE OF YOU – EVERY ONE OF US – to be an active and involved part of Christ's body here, and to make that key difference in the eternal lives of all – others and ourselves.

Thank you and may God bless you.  
Our prayer together:

Dear Father,

We exist because you spoke and the universe was created.

We know you as a child can know his father because you spoke and became one of us.

And this very day we enjoy salvation because you spoke and became the ultimate sacrifice for us.

Father, for the power of your awesome word we are grateful.

For this spiritual family we call Laurel we are grateful.

Thank you for creating this church in Knoxville.

Thank you for the many men and women and children who, over the past 95 years, have enjoyed your blessings and worked diligently to be the church you wanted them to be.

Thank you for the presence of your Holy Spirit as he has sustained this church through periods of peace and periods of unrest.

Thank you for the spirit that presently pervades this church as we scrimmage with the issues, confusion and excitement of perpetual rebirth.

Father, as we now look to the future our desire is the same as it has been since Laurel's birth – we want to be the presence and power of Jesus in Knoxville, and today we bring you these specific requests...

May we grow to know Jesus more fully and to emulate him in everything we do.

May we have a renewed longing for you as you have always longed for us.

May we leave behind our adolescent faith and our selfish, sinful selves and truly understand what it means to seek not only our own interests but also the interests of others.

May we stop hiding our talents and start using the spiritual gifts with which you have already blessed us.

May we be such a loving family that not one member feels the isolation of loneliness.

May we worship you as one body, humbled by your name, thrilled with your presence, awed by your power, and amazed by your grace.

Father, we thank you that, through Jesus, we can approach you with these wishes.

In His name we pray. Amen.