Vision 2018: Getting There Together

As most of you know, here at Colonial we have been on a year-long journey of discernment, seeking the Lord’s will and purpose for our church in this rapidly changing culture. The result of our journey is a renewed sense of clarity in regards to our mission. And what is our mission?

Colonial’s mission is “To be the light of Christ in a hurting culture so that the lost are found, the broken are made whole, the fatherless find hope, and our city is blessed.”

In addition to redefining our mission, we also identified six core values that capture the unique DNA of our congregation. Each value is captured in two words, and they are as follows: Pray First, Safe Harbor, Better Together, Student Strong, Love Generously, and Truth Matters.

These values make us “Colonial,” and as such, we will preserve and hold ourselves accountable to these values come what may.

Last week we unpacked our first two core values: Pray First and Safe Harbor. This morning we are addressing the next two core values: Better Together and Student Strong.

**Better Together**

As you heard from Kevin Nunnally just a few moments ago, here at Colonial we hold to the conviction that we are Better Together, and here’s how we express that value: Better Together: We live out our faith in community. We are a multi-generational, multi-ethnic family that enjoys relationships in small groups; relationships with local and global partners in mission; relationships with our local schools and city officials; and relationships over a cup of coffee throughout the city.

Now, what’s the one word that you heard used over and over again in that definition of Better Together? Relationships! I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard Pastor Bob say these words to me over the past years, “Jim…it’s all about relationships.” Say what you will about great preaching, teaching, worship music, and special events…at the end of the day, the Kingdom work of Jesus Christ is all about relationships. Why is that? It’s because we serve a personal, relational God.

If you think about the Trinity…the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit…you would have to admit that God…in God’s very essence…is relational. Listen to John 15:26, “But when the Helper comes whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.”

This text is just one of many that bear witness to the fact that the very nature of God in His self-expression and self-revelation to His creation is that He lives in a perfectly pure, perfectly loving relationship within the Godhead. Instead of God existing in a cold, isolated “aloneness”…God
lives in community in three persons: The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit…one Godhead in three persons. Now, that may seem overly complicated to somebody outside of Christianity. In fact, the Trinity is a stumbling block for the Jews and the Muslims who can only conceive of God as alone and unapproachable. But that is not how God has revealed Himself to the world. God reveals in scripture that He is a loving, relational Father who lives in perfect Oneness with His Son, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Read the NT and here is what you will find: The Father exalts the Son at his baptism and on the Mount of Transfiguration and says, “This is my Son! Listen to him!” He’s a proud Daddy! Jesus constantly defers to and honors his Father throughout the New Testament, submitting always to his Father’s perfect will as an obedient and loving Son, even when it demands His death on a Roman cross. Jesus refers to the Father affectionally, using the word “Abba”…meaning “Papa.” Jesus also points to the Holy Spirit with love, honor, and excitement…describing the third person of the Trinity as the Counselor, the Spirit of Truth, and the Helper…he tells his disciples in John 14 and John 15 that they will be so blessed when the Comforter comes who will empower them to do even greater things than Jesus did during his time on earth. The Holy Spirit brings power, conviction, and truth into the heart and mind of the believers, and yet the Holy Spirit always points to the Father and the Son. Do you see how much each person of the trinity loves and defers to the other two persons of the trinity? God is a personal, relational God who thrives in community, and as His Church, we are also personal, relational creatures who were designed to thrive in community.

To be a follower of Jesus is to be relational…which means it’s not just about what we believe or how we feel about ourselves…we are part of something much bigger than ourselves. As we read in Romans 12, those baptized into Jesus are now a part of the Body of Christ. We are profoundly, supernaturally connected with one another. Paul writes that we belong to one another (Romans 12:5), and it is in our common life together that we will find our greatest strength and our greatest joy (John 17). We understand that Christianity is not a solo sport. Christianity is a team sport…we live with and rely upon each other, just as we see the Trinity living with and relying upon each other.

So, our value of Better Together articulates our commitment to live our lives together as a community, both in our corporate gathering, and in our time spent in small groups and healthy families. But our value of Better Together also has a few other nuances that I want to flesh out.

First, we are Better Together when we intentionally invite, include, and celebrate our brothers and sisters who love Jesus but come from various ethnic, socio-economic, and cultural backgrounds. You should know that value is contrary to the church growth movement of the 80’s which said that you would grow larger churches by creating environments where “birds of a feather” flock together…where white, suburban people could hang out with their own kind, and black, urban-dwellers could hang out with their own kind. That may be true when it comes to growing large crowds of people, but that’s not the Gospel, and that’s not the witness of the early
church. There’s nothing uniquely Christian about loving and hanging out with your own kind: As Jesus said, “Even the pagans love those who love them.” As we’ve seen throughout the book of Acts, The Gospel has always been and continues to be the only true source of UNITY that has and continues to break down the barriers that frequently cause enmity and distrust among various people groups. Here’s what we know at Colonial: The gospel creates a common narrative for diverse groups of people to experience and enjoy a common life together in Christ, and it is that united expression of a diverse people that brings hope to the world and glory to God. That was the witness of the early church. Read the New Testament and here’s what you will find: When the Holy Spirit came upon a community of believers, the result was unprecedented unity among various people groups who were under the Gospel and chose to do life together, as messy and as challenging as that turned out to be! That’s Colonial…we are a Gospel-saturated church where the Holy Spirit is present, which means we are committed to creating and preserving John 17 unity amongst believers from every walk of life. We will not be content to retreat into a “birds of a feather” mentality—we will uphold the biblical value and conviction that we are Better Together. Amen.

The next nuance in this value is one that Colonial has long held dear, and that is our commitment to partnership. For 65 years, Colonial has initiated, nurtured, and invested in partnerships with other ministries, churches, and organizations in our metro and throughout the world. In fact, one of the most endearing qualities that I LOVE about Colonial is this: It’s never about Colonial. It never has been, and it never will be. Colonial is a KINGDOM minded group of people…in other words, we care more about the growth of the Kingdom of God than we do the growth and promotion of our own organization called Colonial. Such is why we regularly give well over 20 cents of every dollar given to those who are outside of our organization. When we do gather funds to invest in our organization, we almost always set aside a tithe to bless our partners because so many Christian organizations and leaders are doing ministry in settings that lack financial resources. For example, we are currently in a capital campaign with the goal of raising just over 5 million dollars. This campaign is necessary to build a youth facility at Quivira, renovate and upgrade our foyer at Wornall, and then catch up on 15 years of deferred maintenance at both sites that came about due to our recent load of debt. Here’s what I can tell you…our congregation hates spending millions of dollars on ourselves. You hate it, I hate it. We would much rather give that money to our partners locally and around the world to fuel the ministry to the fatherless, the poor, and reaching the lost. Such is why we made a commitment to tithe 10% of our capital funds to serve and encourage our partners…partners we love…partners who inspire us…partners who are reaching those who we cannot reach here at Colonial. One of those partners is the Healing House, and so I would like to invite Bobby Jo Reed to come forward at this time…

The last nuance of better together is simply this: as we move out into the community, we will pursue our mission in a RELATIONAL way. That means we will build relationships with our
local schools, our city officials, and all those we are seeking to reach. We will live in the BLESS rhythms of prayer, listening, sharing meals together, serving, and sharing stories. We will NOT be a transactional congregation. That’s not who we are. We will pursue our mission according to this relational value of BETTER TOGETHER come what may. Amen? Now, let’s turn our attention to our second value of the morning…STUDENT STRONG.

**Student Strong**

As Jim Cannon mentioned, Colonial has always had a heart for students of all ages, beginning with our Preschool and extending through to our college students. We hold fast to Proverbs 22:6 which states, “Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it.” Now…to be clear, I suspect every church in this city would say that they prioritize children and youth, so what is it about Colonial that makes this value unique and special to our DNA as a congregation? Here is how we describe our value of STUDENT STRONG: We equip students of all ages to lead. From preschool on, we invest deeply into the next generation, cultivating a personal relationship with Jesus and entrusting students to positions of leadership and influence.

When you think about the history of our church, one of the major turning points was when Pastor Ted Nissen took over as the Senior Pastor and made a deep commitment to build a youth ministry culture on the corner of 95th and Wornall. To that end, Colonial called a man by the name of Richard Beech who was a gifted evangelist and youth minister. Richard led hundreds of young people to the Lord, and then he discipled them. He taught them how to pray, how to study the scriptures, and how to share their faith. And then he quickly placed them into positions of leadership, where they would have the opportunity to practice what they learned in real-time situations. One of those young people led to the Lord and discipled by Richard was a punk wrestler from Center High School named Bob Lehleitner, and I think it’s safe to say that investing in Bob was an investment that bore much fruit! Ever since those early days in our history, Colonial has not only valued students, we have worked to equip students to be leaders…and that’s what makes our particular value of STUDENT STRONG so unique. Whereas many churches create student programs that are a mile wide and an inch deep, Colonial’s ministry to students is committed to going deeper relationally, theologically, biblically, and missionally so that our young people are prepared to be spiritual leaders by the time they move into adulthood.

Now, to be sure, not all of our students will turn out to be spiritual leaders…but they will all have the opportunity lead…many times and in many ways…before they take off for college or begin their careers. If you have been around Colonial for even a month or two, you will notice that we make some “interesting” decisions when it comes to our life together. For example, you will find that several Sundays out of the month there will be students of all ages leading us in
worship. You will see children who are as young as 2 years old leading from the stage all the way up to our high school and college students. You will observe that we have entire worship services that are hosted and led by our students. That’s not normal these days in churches…not at all normal. Again, the church growth experts will tell you that you need to have professional, expert musicians leading the worship every Sunday in order to grow large and successful churches. They will tell you that you need 20 something adults who are good looking, authentic, and uber-gifted worship leaders who write their own songs, record CD’s, and appeal to a wide audience with their excellence. The experts are probably right about that…such beautiful, gifted musicians would certainly draw large crowds. But to take the experts’ advice…to bench our kids for superstar worship leaders…would be to breech a value that is both intrinsic and essential to our culture here at Colonial. You see, we’re committed to raise students to be spiritual leaders, and we can’t equip students to become leaders if we never give them opportunities to lead in real-time situations. Our students will only learn to lead by leading, which is why we unapologetically devote an entire Sunday to our New Kingdom Singers musicals. It’s why we have our students leading us in worship several Sundays out of the month. It’s why we invite our students to teach, to share, to participate in every mission trip, every partnership, and every missional endeavor that we launch in our church. In fact, our students are so accustomed to leading that they often pilot new ideas before the adults ever catch on! Our Student Ministry piloted house churches, the Advent Conspiracy, and the BLESS rhythms well before our adults caught on to those realities. Hundreds of our students serve on domestic and international mission trips each year in comparison to a much lower number of adults. In schools all over the metro, our students are leading Bible studies, FCA meetings, and other campus ministries. They are taking to heart the challenge to share the Gospel with their peers, and they share their God stories each week as part of their weekly meetings.

I have had the opportunity to be on the mission field in Haiti with our students. I have enjoyed recreation with them at the lake, and I have floated down a river with them on canoes. I have wrestled with their tough questions, sat under their teaching, and been moved in my spirit as they led worship. Here’s what I can tell you: having served in the Youth Ministry for 14 years prior to coming to Colonial, I can honestly say that I have NEVER seen young people who have such a heart for the Lord, such a love for each other, and such a commitment to be the light of Christ as our students here at Colonial. I know I’m biased, but I’m also a truth-teller, and this is the truth: Colonial’s commitment to be STUDENT STRONG is not normal…it’s extraordinary. It’s who we are, and that’s who we will be for many years to come! Now, let me also be honest about the cost. To see these kinds of student leaders developed year after year, Colonial invests deeply in student ministry staff and resources. Per student, I guarantee Colonial has more staff and more dollars invested than any church in the city…perhaps any church in the country! For a church of our size, it would not be unusual to have ONE professional youth minister and maybe an intern or two. In comparison, Colonial currently employs six youth staff, and five of them are serving full time. We have dozens of staff who pour into children through our Preschool and our
Children’s Ministry. We also invest deeply into our annual Summer Staff where some 20 college students live in close, Christian community while leading and serving here at Colonial. It takes an army of committed volunteers to pour into our students…it literally does take a village to raise up Colonial students. It’s a big commitment…but it’s who we are.

Some might come to Colonial and think that the Student Ministry is “the tail that wags the dog” around here. We disagree. When we study Jesus, we see Him prioritizing, loving and pouring into children. When it comes to making disciples, we Jesus pouring deeply into a few people, and then charging them to be leaders who will each pour into a few more. As best as we can tell, that’s how the early church spread like wildfire all throughout the ancient world, and that’s still how God works today. We also see a tenderness of spirit and an infectious enthusiasm among our students that is often lacking among us grown ups…so we invest deeply into the next generation. We won’t apologize for that…it’s who we are. That’s what it means to be part of this fellowship called Colonial, and that’s never going to change.

So…what is our mission? “To be the light of Christ in a hurting culture so that the lost are found, the broken are made whole, the fatherless find hope, and our city is blessed.” And what values will guide how we go about pursuing this mission?

We will PRAY FIRST, we will create SAFE HARBOR, we will hold to the conviction that we are BETTER TOGETHER, and we will continue to invest, prioritize, and equip our kids so that we are always STUDENT STRONG! Next week we will unpack the last of our core values: LOVE GENEROUSLY and TRUTH MATTERS.

Let us close in prayer.