Vision Series 2018: What Comes First

(Begin with video testimony, intro and prayer by team member)

We are on week 3 of our vision series, and this morning we are unpacking the first two Core Values that not only reveal the unique DNA of our congregation, but they are also leading principles that will inform HOW we go about pursuing 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.

Our six core values are as follows: Pray First, Safe Harbor, Better Together, Student Strong, Love Generously, and Truth Matters. We’ll be unpacking all six of these core values in next three weeks, but here’s what comes first: We pray first. In Psalm 55:17 we read, “Evening and morning and at noon I will pray, and cry aloud, and He shall hear my voice.” In Philippians 4:6 Paul encourages us to pray about everything. In 1 Thessalonians 5:17 Paul charges the believers to pray without ceasing. Such is why, here at Colonial, we PRAY FIRST.

When we say PRAY FIRST, here’s what we mean by that: Pray First – We seek the will and power of God’s Holy Spirit to lead us. In praying first, we submit our will to that of the Father, even when that calls for sacrificial or counter-intuitive decisions.

Throughout our history as a church, prayer has been one of the defining attributes of our leadership and our culture. When Colonial Presbyterian Church became a reality in 1953, our identity was formed in prayer. When our first little church building was constructed, a specific room was set aside for prayer, and a group of people would gather in that room to pray, even during the worship services. Throughout the past 65 years, Colonial has served as a house of prayer in this city. Thousands upon thousands of people have sought the Lord in prayer through worship services, in our prayer rooms, in Citywide Prayer services held here, and in countless prayer groups here at Colonial for over half a century. Even to this day, close to 200 people regularly participate in the prayer ministry of our church. Prayer is a core value and practice of our culture at Colonial, but notice: the value we are speaking about this morning is not just that we pray…our number one core value is that we PRAY FIRST!

We chose these words to reflect the priorities of our leadership when it comes to leading the church and making decisions that influence what we do as a congregation. We PRAY FIRST. I will unpack that a bit further in just a minute, but first, let me be very honest with you. I was not a leader who prayed well or prayed first when I first began my ministry at Colonial. Like many people…perhaps most people…my tendency was to exhaust my best thinking and my best efforts, and then, when all else failed, I would pray and ask God to help me! How many of you can relate with that way of living? I think that’s the way a lot of us operate.

It wasn’t until I began serving here at Colonial that I encountered a culture of leaders and believers who would regularly interrupt whatever great idea I was expounding upon and ask the
question, “Have we prayed about that yet? Pastor, did you pray about that first?” Literally…in every meeting I was in…in every conversation about what we should do next…somebody here at Colonial would ask that question, and invariably I would turn red in the face and say something like, “Hmmm….that’s a good idea. Let’s stop and pray now.” After several occurrences of that embarrassing scenario, I began to get it: here at Colonial, leaders were expected to PRAY FIRST…before any ideas were presented, before any plans were made, before any votes were taken…the assumption was that we would PRAY FIRST, not later.

Let me get even more inappropriately transparent! I was initially frustrated by the PRAY FIRST culture of our leadership for my first few years here at Colonial. Not because I didn’t think prayer was a good idea, but because the Elders’ insistence on “taking a month to pray over a decision” made everything in our leadership SLOW DOWN…and when you are a 37-year-old Lead Pastor, SLOWING DOWN is torture!

And then we got into 2010, and the Elders decided we would denote that year as “The Year of Prayer.” We made that decision in the fall of 2009, and I remember thinking to myself… “I’m in big trouble. I’m not the guy to lead a church in ‘The Year of Prayer.’ I need to get some help, and quick!” So, I called on my friend and mentor, Pastor Gary Schmitz, the founder of the Citywide Prayer movement, and I asked him to help lead our church in a revitalization of prayer. I also shared deeply with Gary how pathetic my own prayer life was, and how I felt like everyone at Colonial held prayer as a much higher value and discipline than I did as their Lead Pastor. Gary was full of grace and encouragement, and he agreed to lead us…and to lead me…into a deeper life of prayer. Those of you who were at Colonial at the time may remember the Prayer seminars, Pastor Gary’s sermons on prayers, and our commitment to set apart “prayer rooms” at each campus. We began a week of 24/7 prayer…where a person was scheduled to pray every minute of the day for 7 straight days in our prayer rooms. Needless to say, I was outside of my comfort zone, as were many of you, but that week of prayer began a God-movement in my life and the life of our congregation. At the conclusion of that 24/7 week of prayer, the Lord revealed His plans for the leadership which involved leading the church out of our former denomination and leading the church out of debt. I was there at that meeting when the Lord spoke to us, and it was unlike any “church leadership” meeting I had ever participated in. The church prayed first, the leaders prayed first, and God revealed His purpose and plan. Following that kind of conviction, we moved ahead with obedience, which required our best efforts and our best thinking, but our efforts were empowered with the knowledge that we were acting upon the will of God, and that He had gone before us.

Over the next several years, whenever we ran into a season of great importance, we would ring the bell and call the church to pray. We prayed for the Lord’s will to be done during our legal battle with our former denomination. We prayed to seek the Lord about eliminating the debt when we had no guarantee that we would keep our property. We have called the church to PRAY...
FIRST on several occasions in the past 10 years…the most recent being our call to Pray in May and seek God’s vision for our church. That’s how we roll now here at Colonial…we PRAY FIRST!

To PRAY FIRST is to acknowledge with humility that our best ideas, thinking and efforts are secondary to the perfect wisdom and will of God. When we discipline ourselves to PRAY FIRST, we are agreeing with Jesus in John 15 when Jesus says, “Apart from me, you can do nothing.” When we PRAY FIRST, we are deferring to our Master, and we understand that we are servants who are called to serve as stewards of all that our Master has entrusted to us for His purposes and His glory as Jesus speaks about in Luke 17. When we PRAY FIRST, we begin with the confession of, “I don’t know, but you do. I can’t do it Father, but you can. We have some ideas, but we want to know what you think about this, because your thoughts are higher than our thoughts, your ways are higher than our ways.”

When we PRAY FIRST, we are providing God with the opportunity to receive all the glory, whatever the situation or circumstance might be. I can guarantee you that the most miraculous, powerful, inspiring things that have ever taken place in this church began with prayer, because God will not move in a powerful way if there is any chance that WE might steal His glory. The most recent example of this truth is the story of how Pastor Greg Ealey came to Colonial. Many of you know that Pastor Greg and I were very close friends for several years before he came to Colonial last fall. And I’m sure that many of you have assumed that I recruited Greg for the Wornall Campus Pastor position. Here’s the truth: I did not. In fact, it never even crossed my mind to talk to Greg about the position, even though on paper he was the perfect fit. Because of our frantic schedules and life circumstances in the spring of 2017, I had not even spoken to Greg for several months…so we never spoke about the open position at all. What actually happened is that Colonial formed a search committee in prayer, and then the search committee prayed and sought the Lord, and they went on a journey of faith, waiting for God to reveal the person of His choosing. And then, in June, Brenda Walden, one of our elders, began to sense that the Lord was calling the elders to repent over the sins of our church and church leadership. We talked about that for a month or two, but then scheduled a season of prayer and repentance in our August elders meeting. That night, August 15th, we sought the Lord in earnest prayer, and we repented over numerous things that the Lord brought to our minds, including any vestige or expression of racism that had taken place in our church or leadership over the past 65 years. We had no particular people, decisions or occasions in mind--we simply repented over those things the Lord convicted us to repent over. Two hours later, Elder Ken Kurtz stood up as the Chair of the Pastor Search Committee and began to give his report, and my phone buzzed with a text message. It was from Greg Ealey, inquiring about our open position. He and Salena had just had a season of prayer, and God had made clear that they were released from the church they were serving, but not released from Kansas City. So he literally “Googled” open pastor positions in KC, found our add, and decided to text me to see if we might consider him for the position!
Can you see how by PRAYING FIRST, God receives all the glory for bringing Pastor Greg to Colonial? We can’t take any credit, I didn’t pursue my friend, we didn’t “do a good job” of recruiting excellent talent…we PRAYED FIRST, and God did something REMARKABLE for His glory and His purposes. And man am I grateful He did! Amen?

No matter where our mission leads us, no matter what changes or investments that requires, here is what we will do as a church: we will PRAY FIRST. And then we will obey, whatever the cost, no matter how hard. Whatever we discern from the Lord is what we must do, amen?

Now, let’s move to our second core value, which we are calling: SAFE HARBOR. Check this out.

(Video presentation, testimony, prayer by team member)

Before I get into SAFE HARBOR, let me say a few words about core values. Ted Vaughn helped us to understand that core values should “reflect the unique DNA of our congregation.” In other words, Core Values—generally speaking—are not aspirational, they are observational…if you will. Core Values are not who you are trying to become…they are an observation of who and how God has already wired you to be.

PRAY FIRST is a perfect example of a Colonial core value. We only have to be us, and PRAY FIRST will stick out like a sore thumb to any new person who walks in our doors. At Colonial, we PRAY FIRST…that’s how we roll. To do otherwise would be acting unlike ourselves.

Now, according to Ted (our wonderful facilitator, teacher and consultant), we are allowed to have ONE aspirational CORE VALUE if, and only if, that is the direction we are already trending as a congregation.

When it comes to SAFE HARBOR, this is our one and only “aspirational value.” In my opinion and that of our Vision Team, this value reflects the hearts of our people, it is the direction we have been trending toward, even if we are admittedly not great at living out this value in our current setting. Let me explain.

In Matthew 11:28, Jesus says, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

In this one verse, Jesus puts into words the actual vibe that He obviously communicated wherever He went. Jesus attracted lost and broken people, so much so that he was mocked by the religious people and accused of being “a friend of sinners” in Matthew 11:19. Clearly, Jesus made hurting, broken, weary people feel comfortable in His presence…they felt loved, they felt...
safe, they felt desired…to the degree that they would invite Jesus into their homes, and they would invite their sinful, broken, weary friends to come over and hang out with Jesus.

Jesus created SAFE HARBOR for people. He loved them first; He ministered to their needs; He ate with them; He even gave up His life for them…and all the while, He told them the Truth.

The value of SAFE HARBOR is exactly the practice of Jesus, and that is what we are shooting for here at Colonial. Here’s how we will ask you think about SAFE HARBOR: We lead with grace in every relationship. We provide a safe environment for people in all walks of life and stages of faith to find rest, to consider the claims of the Gospel, and to experience healing from the storms of this life.

Many of you who were around 10 years ago may still remember the first metaphor I used to describe our church. Who remembers? Right…I equated our church with a Coast Guard Cutter (show pic of Coast Guard Cutter https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f5/USCGC_Mellon_WHEC-717_2001.jpg)…and I even played a clip from the movie entitled, “The Perfect Storm.” My point was simply this: Colonial is not a cruise ship designed to serve the appetites and preferences of our passengers. Colonial is not a “country club” that exists to entertain and accommodate the whims of our paying customers.

As a missional organization, Colonial is more like a Coast Guard Cutter…we go out when everyone else is coming in! We must go out, we don’t have to come back…there is inherent risk in our mission, but we must go anyways! Why? Because ships are going down, and souls are perishing…right? Do you remember that?

So, as Brian mentioned, SAFE HARBOR reflects that missional picture, because when we are out there and we build relationships with people who are sinking into the black whirlpool of hopelessness, habitual sin, confusion, and despair…we need to invite them into a SAFE HARBOR (show pic of Safe Harbor http://blog.dockwa.com/hs-fs/hubfs/blog/hurricaneholes/1.jpg?t=1524404284189&width=1920&height=1280&name=1.jpg) where they can come out of the storm and feel safe, cared for, listened to, and accepted. But listen…you would never bring a damaged ship into a safe harbor to just let it sit there. You get that, right? Jesus doesn’t extend grace to those who are weary and heavy laden so that they will simply feel good about being weary and heavy laden. Jesus has every intention of relieving their burden, teaching them about what is true, and sending them back out to sea as part of His missional fleet. The first step, however, is providing an environment…a vibe…where sinful, broken people feel safe to rest, have their needs addressed, explore the claims of the Gospel, and experience healing and transformation. We can and should create SAFE HARBOR in our homes, our workplaces, our schools, and in our countenance wherever we are as Jesus followers. Specifically here at Colonial, we are committed to creating a SAFE HARBOR for all people in
our buildings, in our services, in our behavior, and in our preparations…in every way possible, we will lead with grace in every relationship.

Now…after 10 years, I know my church. So let’s acknowledge the elephant in the room. We are a group of people, many of us anyways, who have been hurt and even traumatized by expressions of Christianity that compromised the Truth of the Gospel under the guise of creating “SAFE HARBOR.” Many of us are familiar with the slippery slope of Christian liberalism that begins with sincere compassion and ends with apostasy. Such is why, here at Colonial, our prevailing cultural value is TRUTH above everything else. When we took the survey last fall, you made your voice very clear: most of you are at Colonial because you want to hear the TRUTH, even when it hurts your feelings! Left to our own tendencies, most of us here at Colonial would rather offend people with the truth than tiptoe around the tulips and risk compromising the truth. Amen?

There is no doubt that TRUTH MATTERS…but, when it comes to dealing with hurting, broken, lost, and confused people, we must lead with grace. I would simply point to exhibit A: Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Nobody cared for the truth, spoke the truth, or embodied the truth more than our Lord Jesus Christ…agreed? Jesus spoke ONLY the truth, and He was the TRUTH. And here’s what we can learn from Jesus: Jesus led with grace in every relationship. Jesus created a vibe…a SAFE HARBOR…such that sinful, broken, and hurting people were drawn to be with Him. People from all walks of life felt loved, safe, and accepted in His presence…and over time, the worst of sinners, the most broken and hurting people in town, became convicted, became repentant, and underwent whole-life transformation. Study the stories involving the call of the disciples; the transformation of Mary Magdalene; the transformation of tax collectors like Zacchaeus; the healing of people with leprosy; and many other stories. Jesus always led with grace in every relationship, and by creating SAFE HARBOR, people came to know and love Jesus, and their lives were forever transformed and blessed.

If ever Jesus led with TRUTH and came across direct and confrontational, it was when He was addressing religious people who had no grace or empathy for those who were hurting. That religious crowd was commonly known as the Pharisees, scribes, and teachers of the law, and Jesus did confront them regularly because they FAILED to lead with grace, thus misrepresenting the God they claimed to follow.

Church, if we are going to value the TRUTH, we must learn to love and practice grace in every relationship, because that’s how the TRUTH—Jesus Christ himself, lived His life. That is the example that He set for His church…and so that is what we are going to do. As John writes in his gospel, “The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”
So what has to change in order for us to best live into the value of SAFE HARBOR… I cannot yet tell you. It may not require a whole lot of change if we take this value to heart and begin to live intentionally in the way that we greet, love, listen to, and demonstrate care for all those whom we encounter, particularly when new people come into our buildings. Creating SAFE HARBOR requires each one of us to intentionally extend grace and hospitality to every person who comes through our doors, regardless of the way people dress…regardless of tattoos…regardless of the way people smell…regardless of race or economic status…regardless of whether or not people agree with our theology. We lead with grace in every relationship…we create SAFE HARBOR…because that’s what Jesus did, and we follow Jesus, amen?

Our 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. As we go about this mission, we will practice, protect, and preserve these two values: Pray First and Safe Harbor. These values will always lead our thinking and our preparation…these values come first.

But they are not the only values. Next week we will consider our next two values: Better Together and Student Strong….and then on the 13th, we’ll conclude our series by unpacking Love Generously and Truth Matters. All of these values are equally important and critical toward accomplishing our mission…but remember…we PRAY FIRST!

Let’s pray right now.