

Building for the Future Vision

Nehemiah 2:15–18 (NRSV)

So I went up by way of the valley by night and inspected the wall. Then I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. **16** The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest that were to do the work. **17** Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.” **18** I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, “Let us start building!” So they committed themselves to the common good.

Introduction. In 1969 during the evening news, one of America’s most trusted news anchors announced that *Chattanooga was the dirtiest city in America*. Eleven years later, Patty and I moved to Hamilton County and spent the next six years here living in Apison. Occasionally we would go downtown but there was little to attract us there. It was probably a little cleaner than in 1969 but it was not a pleasant place to visit with lots of old buildings in disrepair, trash and debris on vacant lots and a high crime rate. In 1986 we moved away from Hamilton County and then returned in 2002.

The transformation of Chattanooga that had begun and was happening was amazing.

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The transformation of the Riverfront on both sides of the river with the Tennessee Aquarium and Coolidge Park as anchors had started a transformation. In the years to follow innovation after innovation came into being - a "Smart grid," "Gig city," transforming an old neglected ammunition production site into the center of auto manufacturing. *Chattanooga and Hamilton County are radically different than when Patty and I lived here in the 1980's.*

All of these changes came about because some people had a vision to transform their community - a vision for transforming the riverfront, a vision for expanding digital technology and connection, a vision for manufacturing.

One of the wisest men to have lived wrote these words in Proverbs:

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"Where there is no vision, people perish" (29:18). Vision is critical to moving forward, particularly when people are in a precarious situation. Our lesson from Nehemiah this morning is the centrality of vision.

Facing the brutal facts.

Last week, Pastor Amanda shared with us how that three days after Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem, he began an assessment of the city ways. He found things were in terrible shape.

After his inspection he met with the leaders of the community. *One might expect his first words to be tout who he was, his officially sanctioned mission and the miracles God had wrought to get him there.*

But Nehemiah began in his conversation with a different speech. He said, *"You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned."* Every person in the room knew these realities. Jerusalem was in trouble. Her existence was at risk. Nehemiah began his effort to bring these leaders on board with the mission by expressing the truth about the condition.

In the classic book, *Good to Great*,

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Jim Collins devotes a chapter to the critical need for companies and organizations who long to rise from difficult places to face the "brutal facts." He maintains that merely sharing the vision of what can be and setting direction is not enough. People must face the realities around them to rise beyond them.

As we move through and hopefully out of this pandemic, our church faces what most businesses, organizations and institutions face - difficult realities and uncertainties about the future.

Last week Pastor Amanda gave us some assessment of our condition as she reflected on our present in person worship attendance, status of small groups, condition of children and student ministries. These are sobering realities.

When our church here is fully open without restrictions and most people feel comfortable in being in public gatherings, I expect we will see a reduction in our overall in-person attendance and overall participation. Some people have gotten into the habit of not attending worship in-person or online who were in the habit of being present. The habit of not attending can be difficult to break. *Some families will not return and some have found other churches where they are now connecting.* Some of us are experiencing grief in these losses because these are people we love and care for.

There is another brutal reality that was in full swing before the pandemic but I believe the pandemic intensified for the Church in general. It was a change in culture

that had been taking place for nearly a decade. It is the shift of how people are primarily brought into the life and community of the church and how they connect to Jesus.

The way people came into a church was largely based on an “attractional model” of ministry. If a church had great worship, excellent children and youth ministries, a great location, a good name in the community, good seniors ministry, great music, etc, people would be attracted to that church in good numbers. For nearly every church, worship was the front door where nearly everyone arrived for the first time. If the church practiced radical hospitality and opened the doors to those attracted, the church would grow. Ooltewah UMC has had a great track record of this in the past.

All of this started changing in a noticeable way about a decade ago. While we still find some are attracted, we cannot impact our community the way God desires based through the attractional model. We have to shift how we do ministry or will find our church shrinking and growing less influential in this community and fewer people following Jesus.

In the bedroom where Patty and I sleep when we stay with her mother is an old manual typewriter.

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It is actually quite valuable as a relic and antique. Years ago, offices across our nation had typewriters like it. It was advanced and reliable when it was introduced. But today, no office staff would dream of using it. We now use keyboards attached to computers. To face the future before us, we too must adjust if we are to be the church God has called us to be.

Vision.

Once Nehemiah had shared the brutal facts, he then shared his vision: *Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.* His vision was clear and succinct. The leaders of Jerusalem were moved by his vision and quickly got on board. They were able to share the vision because it was some they all long for.

For more than 3 decades, OUMC has been a beacon located on I-75.

This church has reflected the light and love of Jesus Christ in northeast Hamilton County and south Bradley County. This church has been home to folks who have lived in this area all their lives and welcomed people who are brand new to the area. This church has reached out with love to people who have been hurting and in need. This church has sought to partner with Jesus Christ to bring his loving, redeeming grace, his healing and help to those in this area and to people around the world.

For many years, the people of OUMC have shared a vision to be a growing thriving church where Jesus Christ is lifted up and people connect with the Savior and become part of this caring community. We have sought to reach across the generations and be truly a family that is expanding in our relationship with others and God.

Coming out of this pandemic, we long to rebuild the vibrant community we have been. We long to see new people becoming part of our congregation and our church growing and being strengthened.

I invite you to join to make the vision of rebuilding this vibrant church and moving into the future church God is calling us to be. We have great hope. The mission before us. We can get there together with God's help.

For some time, the strategy of how we can move toward God's vision for us has been stirring in me. There is a word that is at the heart of that strategy - “hybrid.”

During this Covid season, many of my favorite restaurants have had to go hybrid-having limited indoor dining and take out pick up. Many would have crashed and burned if they had not had the take out. I am not sure how this hybrid model will work

after we emerge from Covid but I suspect take out will still continue to be an important part of their business.

This hybrid strategy involves keeping and strengthening many of the wonderful values and ministries that we hold dear - radical hospitality, caring for one another, being a cross-generational family, serving others, vibrant-relevant worship, strong children and youth ministries, and strong small groups.

These have been our primary engine that have powered our ministry. But to this engine, we must develop hybrid strategy if we are to be the church in 2021 and beyond that God intends. If we are going to continue to reach people with the Good News of Jesus and bring them into Christ's loving family, we must go hybrid.

There are two areas where I believe this hybrid model must be lived out. We have done in-person worship, groups, fellowship and ministry well. **Covid-19 made us pay more attention to the connection we have online and through social media.**

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While we were streaming our services, we were forced to step up our game. Some are coming to realize that it is more than broadcasting some content via the web. For many, engaging and connecting in ministry is vital. We will need some of you to step forward in this new wave of ministry that will make both an earthly and eternal difference in the lives of many. What you saw earlier in this service about our new website is addressing this online vision of connecting.

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The second hybrid strategy **is in how we do outreach to others**. In the past this was largely done by people showing up here because they were attracted. A few of these came because they were invited. Moving into the future, we must be much more intentional and use our great love for fellowship and small groups with those outside the church fellowship.

Let me describe two examples of how this may happen. Imagine a few people who are part of our fellowship have a particular affinity for playing basketball. So they work to form a pick up basketball group in the gym. The goal, though, is not just to play basketball with some folks in the church but intentionally reach out to others who have no connection to the church - have at least half who participate are outside the church. When they gather to play, they have prayer and a devotion and then enjoy playing together.

Imagine a couple in the church looks around in their neighborhood or in their network of friends and associates. The couple wants to have a Bible study with others. So they talk with another couple of two at the church to ask to join them. Then they reach out to their neighbors or network and invite them to join their study.

In both these groups, there is the opportunity to expand the kingdom beyond these walls.

Commitment.

When Nehemiah shared his vision, those who affirmed his vision and committed themselves to the good project. With their commitment, life was breathed into the vision.

Will you commit yourself to the vision of what God has ahead for OUMC? I do not know what it may mean for you in particular but I know everyone will be critical to living into this. For today, will you make the commitment to the good God sets before you?