

Jim Dickerson: Call and Corporate Mission

Seekers Church (CofS)

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Scriptures: [Ps. 24; 2 Sam. 6:1-5, 12b-19; Eph. 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29](#)

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"Go Down" by Dom Helder Camara

*Go down
into the plans of God.
Go down
deep as you may.
Fear not
for your fragility
under that weight of water.
Fear not
for life or limb
sharks attack savagely.
Fear not the power
of treacherous currents under the sea.
Simply, do not be afraid.
Let go. You will be led
like a child whose mother
holds you in her bosom
and against all comers is your shelter.*

I understand you are working with the "Plans of God" or the theme of "Call" in your congregation these days. Looks like today's scriptures are too. Ephesians 1:3-14 is about God's

call and the big Plan into which we (those "who set our hope on Christ"; "have heard the word of our salvation & believed it"; been "marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit") have been called. It is the big call of which we have a share and in which we participate. It is the call out of which we have been equipped, empowered..."blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavens and on earth." This is the grand call and plan that our individual calls emerge from, cohere in and bear their fruit. That is, "In the fullness of time, God will gather up everything in heaven and on earth in Christ and bring it all into a unity in Him." Because as Ps. 24 says, "The earth is the Lord's and all that's in it, the world and those who live in it!" Therefore, that is God's big call and grand plan. How do you feel about it? It reads, talks and feels so good doesn't it!!! [Many in the audience sigh in agreement]

However, there is more to the notion of Call than just God's Grand Plan, isn't there? There's also the calling, commissioning and sending forth of the heirs, the children of God who receive the first installment of their inheritance now from their Divine Parents and are sent out 2x2, traveling light, to share it with others in word and powerful deed. The rule is that to "keep" and grow the inheritance you have to invest it. Then there is the actualization of the call as in the case of King David in today's 2 Samuel reading. David is called to be the personal representative on earth of the "King of Glory and Lord of Hosts." David is called to pull together all his broken, divided and defeated people and make them one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all! (With David in charge of everything of course!) Today we have David brilliantly actualizing his call by bringing the Ark of the Covenant out of long-term storage at Abenadab's house and placing it in the tent (which is about to become a temple) in Jerusalem. The Ark is the great symbol signifying the presence of Yahweh and is associated with Hebrew people who lived in the northern part of Israel. The Tent of Meetings is also the

symbol of God's presence and a tradition associated with the tribes who lived in the southern kingdom. Here David is actualizing his call to both unify his people into one nation by consolidating theological and political power in one place under one God and earthly leader (himself!). Bringing these two great theological traditions together blesses, legitimizes and actualizes David's call. Lastly, there is the consequences or cost of the Call. You get your head cut off as did John the Baptist who was simply being faithful to the call of God on his life as recorded in Mark 6. How did we get from the feel good Call of Ephesians to this painful aspect of the Call in Mark? There is a saying, "Free gifts always cost someone something." So, do real calls from God.

I am not so sure how much we American Christians can identify with John the Baptist and the costly aspect of calls because in America it really does not cost a person anything to be a Christian. That is unless we reject our culture's "golden calves" of consumerism, militarism and materialism (among others) and move in a direction that puts us at odds with popular culture, our social conditioning and society's power structures. Recently, I have realized that one of the reasons I came to CofS 30 years ago was that it cost something to be here. Not a whole lot, but it cost more than what was required of me in the churches of my early Christianity. Perhaps I am just a glutton for punishment, but the cost was part of what drew me. How's that for a Church growth strategy!

Therefore, Seekers let me welcome you to the wonderful world of Church property ownership! You have just bought a new building and your Call is being actualized. Congratulations! How does it feel? [Moans from the audience, "scary" someone says].

We have a building at 614 S St. N.W. and we could not have done what we have done there without your generous and long-term support. Thank you! When my mama got married the first time (I'm a product of that marriage), she said that the only

thing that her daddy told her afterwards was, "Well Helen Mae, I sure am glad I'm not going to have to go through that again!" As happy as I am for you and as much as I love the gift of our building on S St., I am not sure that I have another one of those types of projects in me. We just finished renovating our building again for the second time. It never ends. I know that one of your members, Kate Cudlipp, is also well aware of the joys and sorrows of building ownership from her experience at the Thurgood Marshall Center. [Kate is shaking her head in the affirmative].

Now to the point of what Doug Dodge (who invited me to preach) said that I was to talk about, i.e., my call and thoughts on corporate mission. Many of you know my background. Briefly, for those who do not, I grew up on the rough side of the mountain in small town Arkansas. I hit a bottom in my life at age 22 and found God and God's love there. Everything changed at that point and so did I. I began a new life that I did not know existed before. It was like being born all over again and it was wonderful. I gladly exchanged a life of misery for one of purpose, meaning and deep joy. I did not grow up in the institutional Church. My family was a mess and churches rejected us. I do not blame them even though it was contrary to Jesus' instructions. My parents got sober and were in AA for one year and that group greatly and positively influenced my vision of the church. After my initial change at 22, I never was fully satisfied with the programs of the churches I attended. They were either focused on personal faith (inward journey) or social activism (outward journey), but not the two together. I wanted and desperately needed both practiced in the context of a Christian community. Therefore, 30 years ago God lavished even more undeserved Grace upon me and hooked me up with the CofS who was trying to do both in community. I came, I saw, I bought into it and I stayed. Nevertheless, I brought a call with me from Arkansas. It was to learn and practice the basic principles of the CofS program and one day go back to Arkansas to start a new Church which incorporated

these basic exportable principles in forms appropriate for that setting. I had no idea how to do it and I had a very long way to go personally before I was remotely ready. It took me 13 years of preparation and many ups and downs (a long story). Finally, 18 years ago I started New Community Church in the Shaw neighborhood of D.C., not Little Rock, Ark. Two years later NCC moved to it's building at 614 S St.

I am a community and program organizer. I am a "beginner of things," one who can take significant risk, carry lots of responsibility and manage crisis well. This is my nature and conditioning. I learned all this in my family of origin at a very early age (another long story). Being the oldest and most responsible person in my alcoholic family, I felt like I had been married all my life until I was 18 years old and left home for the Army. I have started numerous community programs over the years and organized much from the time I was a kid. I can do that with my eyes closed. If I go to hell or heaven, I know I will organize the rats and roaches there. However, The Church, especially **this** type of church, was different. It required more and different resources I did not have, but would have to develop if I was to be faithful with this call.

The Church is not my program, it is Jesus' program and quite a program it is! We have not come near realizing or matching it yet with one of our own service organizations! He created it, and He sustains, informs, corrects, leads, empowers and develops it. What I do is discover what's He has already created. I internalize it, embody it, follow it, live into it, join it and live it out as best I can with others. Starting a local expression of Christ Body is different from creating a community program or organization. Community programs and para-church efforts seem to be sexier, garner more recognition and short-term ego satisfaction these days. However, who takes the local, roots-of-the-grass, neighborhood based Church seriously and what real power and influence does it have in a world that seems to be falling apart? Who is excited about and

called/committed to Jesus' new society and alternative Church these days? I say, very few and very little. Nevertheless, I have this strange feeling deep down that Jesus' Church on the local, neighborhood level is the most important thing to be about even though it's the least valued and most insignificant thing in the eyes of the world. I am not talking about denominational or organized institutional Christianity nor the electronic or mega-church or the religious entertainment industry here. I'm talking about "where two or three (or more) are gathered together in the name of Jesus" and are trying to be intentional about being His Church and together making a total commitment of their lives to Him in their local context.

We have just celebrated our 18th birthday at NCC. I cannot believe it! Eighteen years ago I started NCC and [Manna Inc.](#) (an affordable housing & Comm. Development Org.) and wife Grace and I adopted our youngest son, Andre' all at the same time and we did this out of a sense of Call. What in the world were we thinking! For the past 18 yrs., we have been actualizing these calls and living with the consequences of them for better and worse. In the 18 years plus, I feel I have learned a few simple things about our unique approach to Church and Church membership. I want to share some of those things with you today. You probably already know these things.

First, I have learned our CofS model is not easy or very popular and it is harder and less popular now than ever before. Not very many people are interested in it these days. This is, in part, because people have so much to do, and so much money with which to do it. There are many more competing priorities these days than in the past. Our approach requires one to make some hard choices between good things you would like to be doing. Moreover, the thrust in most churches is to ask as little as possible of folk and entertain them as much as possible in order to get them in the pews and on the membership roles. Rather than challenge folk with the radical claims and compassion of the gospel the way Jesus did and call

them to a total commitment of their lives and resources to Christ, many Churches survey neighborhoods asking what people want and design their program accordingly. Can you imagine Jesus adopting this approach when he recruited his disciples? We are living in an age of gross accommodation of the culture and settling for the "lowest common denominator" by the church. These are signs that the Church is currently living in and through the age of what Walter Bruggeman calls its own "exile."

Second, the majority of those who come into our circle at NCC expresses interest in some of our commitments and Spiritual practices, but rejects others. Only a very few want the whole ball of wax, the total package. I have learned that what most folks want is community and the Sunday morning worship and fellowship which is one important part of the Church, but not all of it. People like the music, food, sharing, praying, occasional good sermons, retreats, classes, missions etc. However, the big draw is community, and especially if it is diverse. I am always amazed and astounded by how much people will say "yes" to things they do not want just to so they can have the one or two things they do. Nevertheless, it hardly ever works out long term under these circumstances. In AA we have a couple of sayings, "It works if you work it" and "half measures avail us nothing." These sayings speak to the necessity of a total commitment to the program if one is to get the full benefit of it. I have found that the same goes for our Church's program of personal and spiritual growth, mission and community. It is not a good match for everyone, but for those who are called to it and who give themselves as fully as possible for the long term, the benefits are substantial and far outweigh the cost involved.

Third, in our CofS approach, no matter how flexible and accommodating we are, everyone has his/her own unique struggle with some aspect of what is required. However, the struggle I have found that cuts across all divisions, distinctions and

backgrounds is accountability. That is, being held accountable and holding others accountable in love, freedom and humility for our commitments and lives in Christ. This common struggle is symptomatic of the rugged individualism of our culture and institutional religion in which we are all so deeply influenced by and conditioned. The notion of commitment is hard (especially for men), but accountability is the greatest difficulty for most people regardless of background. It levels the playing field.

Finally, a word about "corporate mission." [I jokingly ask Doug to stand beside me and help me get out of the room when people start coming after me.] At NCC, we have had numerous transitions with various combinations of folk over the years. We have had a few big power struggles and times when different visions and calls competed and were at odds with each other. That is the nice way to put it. [Audience laughs] Sometimes (more than we would like to admit), the devil has taken over completely! Of course, this has not happened in Seekers church yet. [Many laughs] Since becoming a Christian and member of the church, I've realized that I used to hang out in "grab 'em & stab 'em" bars and night clubs that were less dangerous than many Church members meetings I've participated in.

One of the biggest struggles with us has been what I call the "week day Church vs. the Sunday Church" at 614. We have a full house and many activities going on 7 days per week at 614 S. Over the years and at various times, the weekday and Sunday church has grown apart with only a few of us working to keep the two connected. In the Shaw neighborhood, it is estimated that 80% of the members of Churches there come from outside the neighborhood. This has been one of the big contributing factors to the deterioration of the area. These historic African American churches were a big part of the "glue" that once held the neighborhood together. Rev. Walter Fauntroy tells the story of his own church, New Bethel Baptist, and how fearful the members are to come to church especially on a

weeknight. The disconnection with the neighborhood makes the churches into little isolated islands unto themselves rather than integral to the social fabric and health of the neighborhood. As a result, the human relationships are not based on "normal," natural, neighborly, familiar social interactions. Rather, they are based in social programs, services and "helping" relationships that set up barriers hard to break through and causing real community and mutuality difficult to form. The incredible thing is that, for the most part, these historic black churches began in that neighborhood and that they were once made up of people who lived in the area. One church has recently made a very public decision to move out to "Mega Church land" in P.G. county Md. where it's pastor and most members reside. Another Church fashions itself in island imagery. They refer to themselves as an "Oasis!" Most all their members come from the suburbs, further promoting the sense of isolation and estrangement between itself and the "bad" neighborhood around it.

Our call at NCC has been to be a neighborhood based church focused on that block and immediate area and we have our hands full right there! We have always tried to hold the two (weekday vs. Sunday) in tension when people who have no contact throughout the week come on Sunday only. So what do you do? Do you let it go? Do you give up on your call? Create a church where people who have lives and missions in other places come together on Sunday mornings, refill their spiritual tanks, then go out to their separate places? That is certainly one valid call and vision of the church. When does a call end? Our rule is that a call ends when the fire goes out of your bones and there are no more called people left to carry it out! There is nothing wrong with this other vision of the church. It is just different from the one we have been working with at NCC for 18 years. Nevertheless, there is a problem when you are called to build community and Church and really be connected with people in a neighborhood more than providing space and rendering social services in a building.

What you get is an isolated island, an enclave of the similar at the core of the church membership. It will not work if the call is to build community, mutual belonging as equal brothers and sisters in Christ at the core membership level.

Therefore, we have struggled, we continue to struggle and we have a long way to go. Eventually those who primarily wanted the Church to be a community and Sunday morning fellowship moved on. We created a category of membership called "congregational members" for those who have claimed NCC as their church, support our basic call and vision as stated in our literature but don't want or are not ready for the full commitment. A few core members stayed who clarified and sharpened the focus of our corporate call and Mission. [At this point I read the section of our call that we strengthened: "To carry out a holistic ministry at 614 S St and surrounding neighborhood, **linking both week day and Sunday ministries together as one church.**") We are not close to fully realizing our call yet, but at least we are clear and more single-mindedly focused now. I have learned that no matter what your call and mission, the important thing is clarity and single-minded, unreserved focus. I can say that today things seem to have changed for the better. After a period of sparse attendance and regrouping, new opportunities and possibilities are slowly opening up. I sense that we are being called by God to take things further and deeper than ever before.

Seekers Church, you have bought a building in a neighborhood that is unlike the one you have been in for 20 years. Historically, 2025 Mass has been a wonderful gathering place for people all over the region for the past 50 years and it will continue to be for the near future. Nevertheless, in my opinion, one of the reasons our little CofS churches are not more integrated and diversified at the core, in spite of all of our many efforts and programs, is because we still have not become integral enough to the neighborhoods in which we are located. We are made up primarily of people who come in,

volunteer and serve but in ways we do not fully understand or recognize yet, remain islands unto ourselves at the core. We have not found our way into the deeper fabric of our communities yet. For a lack of a better word, we have not developed "natural" associations. It is not as if we are primarily neighbors and friends and relate to each other on that basis. We have much more work to do in this regard.

Seekers, my sense is your vision of who and what you will do and be is emerging and in process. It will take shape as you settle into your new home. Perhaps, your new place and neighborhood will challenge you to think about corporate mission, its importance and role, in some new and helpful ways you have not before. I hope so. Then NCC can come and learn what new and creative things you are doing that can help us move a little closer to realizing God's grand plan for the earth, the world and all those in it. We love you and are with you all the way. God Bless you.