



Facing Challenges as We Follow Jesus

Background: Over the last two decades God has done a truly significant, transforming work at ACAC. We have witnessed a congregation of 400 people with few connections to the immediate neighborhood become a hub of God-honoring service to that same neighborhood, as well as to thousands from the tri-state area. People from all walks of life have gained new depths of kingdom understanding, discernment and involvement by virtue of being immersed in a diverse, serving assembly. Our witness in Pittsburgh is strong and God's work here has encouraged many other fellowships around the world and across the nation. So the ministry-redesign efforts explained in this communication flow from a position of strength, not failure. We're plugging some leaks and adding some sails - not abandoning a sinking ship!

Our Challenges: Several years ago we began to discern some weaknesses in our congregational life and experienced a plateau in numerical growth. Internal surveys affirmed our suspicions as to why these developments occurred. ACAC, by God's grace, is very strong in two areas - worship and service. Both are indispensable for a healthy, mission-effective church. Worship is the foundation for everything we do, and service leads to a strong witness. But we were not as strong in a third essential component - *personal growth in the context of relationships*. As we grew larger many have found it difficult to connect and form friendships. Some, after attending for a time, have walked away, frustrated they couldn't connect. Others are not gaining the community-based learning and change they need to grow in grace. They attend one service and depart. In light of God's mandates these developments are simply not acceptable. That's our first challenge.

Our second challenge lies in the area of *kingdom growth*. When people attend at peak hours and cannot find seats without difficulty they rarely return. Thus, we have seen surges in attendance without sustained growth. Years of study indicate congregations historically fall back to 80% seating capacity. This, too, is unacceptable in light of the Great Commission. Our crowded conditions at 10:00 and 11:30 make Friends Sundays and other evangelistic thrusts difficult, limit our ability to influence people towards faith and disciple them in faith, limit our resources for world missions, and limit our Children's Ministry, currently on the verge of placing children on waiting lists due to inadequate space at peak hours. In the face of these developments we cannot hang out a "No Vacancy" shingle and expect to receive God's blessing.

Response: In light of the above, several years ago we appointed a Strategic Planning team from our membership and staff to listen to our people and listen for God and formulate a strategy for moving forward. They held many group sessions and interviewed many of our people. They discerned leadings from the Lord that were shared with you previously. You prayed for them. Then their work was passed to a Design Team that considered possible options for addressing our two biggest challenges. I want to thank the men and women who have worked behind the scenes for 100s of hours in this endeavor! *And I want to thank you for your patience and prayers! It has taken a long time to get to this report.* Why? First, the challenges confronting us were not easily addressed. Every proposed solution seemed to birth new problems. Second, as we planned we discovered previously unrecognized problems along the journey - such as the insufficient infrastructure surrounding me and serving our staff. These had to be addressed before further changes could occur.

The plan we are recommending will have its share of bumps and adjustments; *change is never perfect and always a bit messy!* But I'd rather address the ripple effects of decisive action than die the death of fear, suffocate from a thousand qualifications, or succumb to the paralysis of analysis. Moving forward in God's work requires decisive action. And as one of our elders observed, he's never been part of a congregation that

handled major change as well or as maturely as ACAC. I concur! We can do this!

A Ministry Culture Change: Culture has been defined as, “the way we do things around here;” and every church has a unique culture. If that culture is being shaped by the Holy Spirit, it will fit the ministry opportunities entrusted to that church, and will be constantly adjusting as the surrounding mission field changes. It will be flexible and relevant! If it’s shaped by tradition, fear, or reliance upon man’s ingenuity, it will be deficient and irrelevant. At ACAC we’ve always sought the Spirit’s leading for our ministry culture, and the following changes reflect that prayerful search. I’m confident this is God’s leading. Consequently, in order to make room for growth and help people grow we’re proposing *a culture change, not mere program changes*. Our elders and staff are convinced God desires everyone who attends ACAC to experience *worship, service and personal growth* as the indispensable *threads of mature discipleship*. We obviously cannot and will not attempt to force anyone to embrace these; but they will constitute our communicated, unapologetic desire for all. We won’t be content with large numbers of folks attending one hour of worship while neglecting the other threads. If some want to abstain from one or more of these threads they will certainly be loved, welcomed, and served, but our prayer will be that every attendee would allow God to weave each thread into their life. In a society that values the success of the individual more than relationships and being a spectator more than being a participant, we believe God has called us to be engaged in one another’s lives, where we can be known and transformed. And we believe growth groups are the means to pursue those ends.

Program Changes: The changes intended to facilitate this culture shift and allow for growth are below. They are vitally connected.

•**We believe we need to expand our worship opportunities from 4 to 6 each weekend with two services Saturday night and four on Sunday.** These services will be one hour in length as we remove announcements and other non-essentials. **Vocal worship and preaching won’t be reduced!** Instead, the impact of the service will be *enhanced* but what follows.

•It is our intent to form **Growth Groups** – gatherings of 10 to 12 people – that will move immediately from the sanctuary into sermon-based discussion and interaction sessions across the campus. Here, believers will wrestle with the application of the sermon to everyday life, and form the relationships and support systems that foster growth and build real community. More about group makeup will be shared in coming weeks, but there'll be flexibility in group makeup, so that everyone can connect with people with whom they can relate or desire to form connections. Groups can be based on age, shared life chapters, intentional diversity, shared affinities, etc. No one will be arbitrarily assigned to a group. I'll prepare discussion questions for group facilitators in advance. We believe this approach is more effective than leaving group leaders isolated trying to unpack hard to grasp passages. Groups will have direct access to the teaching of pastoral team members who've been called, gifted, recognized by the church, prepared, and examined. Materials will conform to what God is doing here, not somewhere else. We want to create the same dynamic as a home group, without requiring people to find child care and set aside another evening for a two hour study and interaction session.

With the study offered in the sermon and the spirit prepared in worship, participants can move directly into the sharing, growth, and connections that only occur in community. That's why we're layering the services in pairs on Saturday and Sunday.

For those who serve on the weekend, growth group involvement can occur at another time during the week, in a variety of settings (the church, homes, or elsewhere). These *may* follow the sermon-based model and will also be organized upon preferred, not assigned, connections. But that will not be the case for all groups! Some group experiences may revolve around other topics. Our goal is for everyone to have a group experience without limiting format. Those currently involved in or desiring a group experience based upon need (co-dependency, addiction recovery, grief, etc.) or based upon specific topics (life skills, theology, etc.), or based upon identity (women's Bible study, men's leadership, etc.) will find these still available.

For those who attend growth groups on the weekend, service can occur throughout the week. ACAC is involved in service 7 days a week, and our facility is in constant use for that purpose. *The intent is that each person would capture any two of the three threads on the weekend, and the remaining thread through the week.* In light of multiple life and family responsibilities we don't want folks traveling to the church more than twice a week. We're attempting to simply life, not complicate it, and leave time for margins and witness to unbelieving friends.

Those with children will find we've always had two options for children every weekend - class and Jr. Worship. We would love to see *every child* access both of these complimentary ministries in their formative years. Those with youth will find worship, growth, or service opportunities at every hour on the weekend. No longer will attendance hours be determined by when Student Ministries are offered. Something will be available every hour. The entire family can be discipled within a 2 hour time investment.

•**The layering of services will also make it possible for us to break through our current plateau and alleviate the 10:00 a.m. space crunch in both the sanctuary and Children's Ministries.** The crowded middle hour will be spread over two hours, making it possible to once again invite friends and designate specific weekends for evangelistic outreaches. Visitors will be able to find a seat without feeling awkward or embarrassed.

I recognize the concern that more services may make it difficult to connect with specific friends, but in this model friends could easily arrange to attend the same group and thus have far more quality interaction than they can gain presently during a few moments in the lobby, or while crossing the street to pick up their children!

Preaching: If you wondering how I will preach 6 times the answer is, "I will not." I will plan to preach 3-4 times every weekend (except the once a month I give my voice a break and catch up on other duties). The other services I will teach by way of video, using a higher level of technology and quality than our current models. I will rotate my involvement in services,

so that most of you will receive my teaching live most of the time, but not all of the time. There will not be a permanent “live” service or “video” service. Even the first service on Saturday will occasionally feature video teaching, prepared during the week before a small live assembly. On occasion I will preach live in the chapel, something I’ve wanted to do for a long time.

Those who worship in the Robinson Chapel are already accustomed to this video format, and recent surveys and personal words of testimony indicate a high level of satisfaction with the experience, providing there is live worship, which will be the case in every service.

Wise Stewardship: As I have shared previously, years ago the Lord put a check in my spirit in regards to building a larger worship center on this location. I couldn’t understand why, but knew I was being told to wait! I believe I now know why. First, as I’ve shared previously, our infrastructure wouldn’t support further growth, and I would not have survived it personally. Too many things depended upon my action and involvement. Second, I am always thinking ten years down the road, so that ACAC doesn’t become a monument rather than a movement. When I retire I want to do so with ACAC positioned for effective ministry long after I’m gone. And I firmly believe the Lord has shown me that within the next 20 years or so very larger sanctuaries will be burden to those who operate and own them, and will be seen as cultural relics of an era when bigger was seen as better. I believe God wants His church in this nation to reject the “edifice complex” and invest more in people, justice ministries and mission than in brick and mortar. I believe He wants us to return to the tabernacle model, rather than the Temple model. The tabernacle model was a flexible one, as the tabernacle could be moved fairly easily as the people moved. The Temple was fixed and static.

Technology advances have now made it possible for healthy churches to replicate their ministry in many locations by use of video teaching. This model is *working all across the country*, even in very conservative areas. It’s beyond the trial stage. Churches are being planted with the knowledge teaching will always come by means of video, and are growing to

thousands in a matter of years. Numerous Alliance churches are employing it with great success, in vastly different cultural settings. Churches are being planted for a few hundred thousand dollars, rather than millions in building programs. As conditions change, meeting places can be quickly changed. Ministry can be extended to any neighborhood where a venue can be located, and multiple, smaller, more affordable sites can replace large, expensive development.

In addition to the financial wisdom of the video approach, the stewardship of the abilities of those called and gifted in teaching and preaching can be better utilized. Many church plants fail because of the lack of appropriately gifted preacher/teachers. In the video model, those who have been called and gifted can extend their gifting where it is needed. The video approach also increases the effective stewardship of existing facilities, as smaller venues can be established throughout a campus, focusing on target groups by means of music and style, while still employing the teaching that is shaping the entire congregation.

Recent studies have shown the current move of God is leading congregations to see the optimum seating size for sanctuaries in the 21st Century as 1200 or less, with additional "seating" provided through multiple services and video venues. I firmly believe God, in saying "wait" in regards to expansion, has spared us from what may have proved to be a financial and ministry albatross around our necks! If we can expand the ministry God's entrusted to us for hundreds of thousands of dollars - rather than millions - especially in these hard times, why would we pursue any other means? Remember, the church does not exist primarily for the comfort of its members, but for the salvation of the world, through any and every means possible.

Some Final Remarks:

- I recognize change is difficult for all of us! And I have always paid a high price for leading in change. But healthy things grow, and growing things change, and following Jesus does not allow for keeping everything the same. Eric Hoffer once said, "In times of change (and we are in such times) learners inherit the earth, while the learned (those who will not change) find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer

exists.” I don’t want us to be the curators of a museum, but pilgrims on a journey.

- The changes we have described are the result of untold hours of prayer from you, and untold hours of work and seeking God on the part of congregants and staff called by God. I believe when we pray God answers, and that this represents His answer. Consequently, I would ask that even if you find some of the changes difficult, seek God and give time for reflection, and then ask any and every relevant question, in a constructive fashion. Please do not question the hearts of those God has equipped and called to serve in leadership. Such people, although never perfect, are to be given the benefit of the doubt, rather than being doubted at every turn.

- These changes do not constitute a *dumbing-down* approach to ministry. Studies of those who have followed the sermon-based model for over 30 years indicate it leads to a better grasp of Scripture and theology. And we are also committed to increasingly using our web site and Podcast formats to offer specific teaching in areas of book study, theology study, etc. in a format that is readily accessible and not bound by time and space considerations. We want our people to know the Bible!

- Finally, we must remember where we are!* We are not sitting on 40 acres of land in a growing suburb where the surrounding community is relatively stable, poverty is somewhere else, violence is rare, the schools are prestigious, and most occupy the same socio/economic position. If we were we could have long ago built larger facilities more conducive to a simpler design for worship and personal interaction. In such settings a strong worship and home groups design is currently very effective. But if ACAC followed that model the surrounding community would find us self-absorbed and irrelevant! That’s why God first led us to be strong in worship and service. We’re in a landlocked location in a neighborhood where many are poor and people die from violence. We’re seeking to build community by bridging long-standing fears and division between people groups of vastly different backgrounds and worldviews. We’re not a homogenous church with a few minority folks who’ve been assimilated into the majority culture. God called us to be a metropolitan assembly in an urban neighborhood tackling the tough issues; the really sticky ones most churches never face. **It will always be harder here! That will never**

change! But the Bible reveals that it's on the front lines that the greatest learning and growth occur. And it's maturity - not convenience - that we value as followers of Jesus.

The changes described here will not be unfolding in the next few months, but we are committed to instituting them this calendar year. Prior to their implementation you will receive many of the details you will need to plan your participation in satisfactory fashion. We plan to communicate, communicate, communicate! Towards that end I would encourage you to post your questions via email to Pastor Blaine Workman at blaine.workman@acac.net. He will pass everything along to our leadership.

I count it a privilege to be with you on this exciting journey, and I love you more every day!

Grace and peace,

Pastor Rock