Get Out of the Box

1. Overview: As of this month, Jennifer and I will have been serving at HHBC for 15 years. That is a sobering thought because the average stay of a pastor at a church in America is 3 ½ years. It is equally sobering to think about the fact that long term pastors tend to settle for the status quo and stop striving for greater things of God in their congregation. I also celebrate my 37th year as a follower of Jesus Christ this month as well.
   a. It is with those thoughts that I have prepared my message today.
      i. I want my light to grow stronger, not dimmer as I approach the finish line.
      ii. I don’t want to leave this life with regrets that I could have made a difference if I hadn’t rested on my past accomplishments instead of striving for God’s destiny for my life and our church.
      iii. I want to spend the next 15 years pressing into God’s Presence, sharing the message of the gospel to those who haven’t yet received it. I don’t want to experience retirement, I want to experience revival! How about YOU?

2. The elders and I have been praying actively about what our church’s role is in our community and what kind of expression God would have us give of His Presence and love in our community.
   a. As we look at other churches, we see that many of them have what I call an expression of their identity in serving their community. Our message is the gospel, but the outward expression of it depends upon the gifting and mission of our church members and leaders.
      i. One church in our area has meals for the community, another has a clothing center, yet another has a healing service once a week. Each has a unique expression of their identity as a local body of Christ.
      ii. How we present the gospel varies with the culture of our community, the people we are trying to reach, even the gifting of our particular church members. Jesus didn’t prescribe the methods for telling the world about Him. But He did command us to go.
      iii. “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19)
   b. I would like to tell you a story about my sister in law, Deborah Quick, who passed away from this life. Some years ago, she and her close friend, Chris, were driving along and she felt as if God was telling them to stop and go into a nearby bar. They stopped and walked into the bar, and just as they entered, the band stopped playing and went on break. The manager of the bar got up and asked if anyone would like to play something on the piano during the break. So Chris, (at Deborah’s urging) approached the manager and offered to play the piano and have Deborah sing…but they only knew worship music. The manager agreed. They played and people actually listened. Afterwards, numerous people approached them and thanked them for “bringing church to them” since they didn’t feel very comfortable “going” to church.
      i. I shared this story at our recent Discovering Hope Partnering Class and Steve and Paula were there. Steve, who many of you know, plays guitar with our worship team, also plays in a secular band that plays at bars. Steve made a comment that struck me in the core of my being. He said, “Gee, It would be really neat if our worship team could ‘open’ for our band at one of our gigs.”
      ii. I don’t know how our worship team feels about that…but it caught me totally off guard. I realized at that moment how “Inside the box” my thinking and dreaming had become. We all do that.
         1. (I am not advocating going to bars as a normative way to share the gospel, only illustrating that Jesus went and still goes where people are far from God.).
         2. Put up our slide “out of the box.”
a. We think in terms of “come to church” instead of “go to where hurting people gather.”
b. We think in terms of our safety and comfort instead of where people actually live in danger.
c. We tend to be more concerned with what people think about us instead of what God thinks about them.

3. So let me back up a bit and share a few things about our church.
   a. While Here’s Hope has been in existence for over 40 years, our vision and mission have evolved over time.
      i. About four years ago, we experienced what I call a “reset” in which we essentially started over. Part of that reset included a constitution re-write, a redefining of membership (to partnership) and a shift in the composition of our attendance. God raised up a worship band that helps bring us into the Presence of God each week.
      ii. We aren’t the same church we were 10 years ago, because God has radically changed our identity as a community of faith. Some of you who have been here longer than I have can probably see the changes. And while they might not all be in alignment with your tastes, you have embraced them because the changes are designed to REACH the younger generation.
   b. For Here’s Hope to embrace our new identity requires that we discover our purpose within the community of Madison, which includes uncovering ways in which we can uniquely serve the people of our area with the Gospel.
   c. Our church’s name “Here’s Hope” contains a powerful verb…”IS” – meaning that those seeking hope can find it here!
      i. God’s love and presence is here. That is why there is hope here. He is big enough to meet your needs and to comfort your sorrows, to heal your wounds, and to mend your heart. He is a loving Father who wants to restore you to His love and to know Him as Daddy.
   d. Does our mission and vision statements on the front of your bulletin resound with your heart…or are they just another cute slogan like so many you encounter every day on television and in magazines.
      i. They can’t be mere slogans. They are designed to help us focus our expression of our existence. Everything we do should flow through them.
         1. Safe Harbor.
         2. Growing Disciples.
         3. Who Change their world with love, power and grace of God.
         4. We exist to reach our neighbors, the unchurched and the next generation with the good news of Jesus Christ.
      ii. Being a safe harbor is vital to reaching a hurting world. Can a person broken by life feel safe by coming into our midst? Are we welcoming and loving enough to tell people that God loves every person, irregardless of their past?
      iii. The bigger question might also be is do YOU feel comfortable inviting that person who is far from God, that neighbor who spends all night partying, or that relative who has said the church will collapse if they come in? Do you feel safe to invite them to join you at our services or social events? If you do, then why aren’t you inviting them?
   e. Would someone far from God feel safe here?
      i. Let’s do a simple exercise in thinking outside the box to answer that question:
      ii. Look at this next slide:
1. Our first reaction is what WE think and feel about it, what others might say, how we might be perceived, etc.
2. However, ask this question instead: “How would those far from God feel about it?” Would they be more or less open to entering our doors as a result? (After all, Sunday at 11am is the HAPPIEST hour of the week!)

4. **To change our world, we must be better disciples.** Growing as disciples. Making disciples.
   a. What are you willing to lay down, what obstacles are you willing to let go of to be a better disciple, to be a growing disciple?
   b. We can have all the great ideas of reaching people, but unless we are better disciples, we won’t be making very good ones, nor will be attractive for people who are seeking to see what God is like.
   c. Whether we want to believe it or not, each of us reproduces what is inside of us. Biologically it is our dna…whatever is in us is what we pass on to others. Biblically speaking, God created everything to reproduce after its own kind.
      i. What is inside of You? How hungry for God are you? How responsive are you to His love? Have you received His love? Are you willing to fully embrace His love and plan for your life?
   d. You and I aren’t here by accident. God called us together because He has a plan for us together
      God has called us together to belong to each other in Christ.
      i. Romans 12:5 says, “in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”
      ii. This belonging to one another is part of how God designed the church. It is to be a relationship of individuals, connected to one another in community. Another way to put it is that we are to be “family” to one another.
      iii. It is my hope and prayer that you feel and experience that at Here’s Hope. But to maintain that experience, we also must intentionally connect ourselves to one another in small groups, fellowships, bible studies and service.
         1. These connections are places where we learn that we are loved just as we are. They are places where we actually experience love and grace.
         2. I read this week that the three most important words we long to hear are “I love you.” And the four most important words are similar, “I believe in you.”
            a. These words communicate that we don’t have to do life alone.
            b. They remind us that we have others who are there for us, there with us, who are willing to walk with us through the dark times of life.
         3. In our small group, we laugh together, eat together, pray together, and share life experiences. I have been surprised by what I have learned from the difficult life experiences people have shared with us in our small group. I have a deeper understanding and affection for each of these folks in our group as a result of our sharing and caring.
      iv. Attending on Sunday morning is the just first step to becoming a part of our family. Joining us in fellowship meals, small groups and serving together is how we grow deeper in that family experience. It is my prayer that each of us will embrace the joy that comes from being connected with one another, and then find ways to express that outside of these walls.

5. How can we get out of our comfortable BOX (show slide of a box)?
a. (testimony by Pat Bush)
b. If you aren’t going forward, you are going backward
c. Are we willing to trade our comfort for the souls of people who are far from God?
d. Revival is literally reconnecting to the life of God – and surrendering your will to God.
   i. If you are worried that your past is too sordid for God, you are mistaken.
      1. God is much more interested in your future than in your past,
      2. Your past doesn’t define you, it prepares you for your future.
e. God will use your broken places, your failures, your past, to touch other people. Won’t you let Him? Let’s Pray.