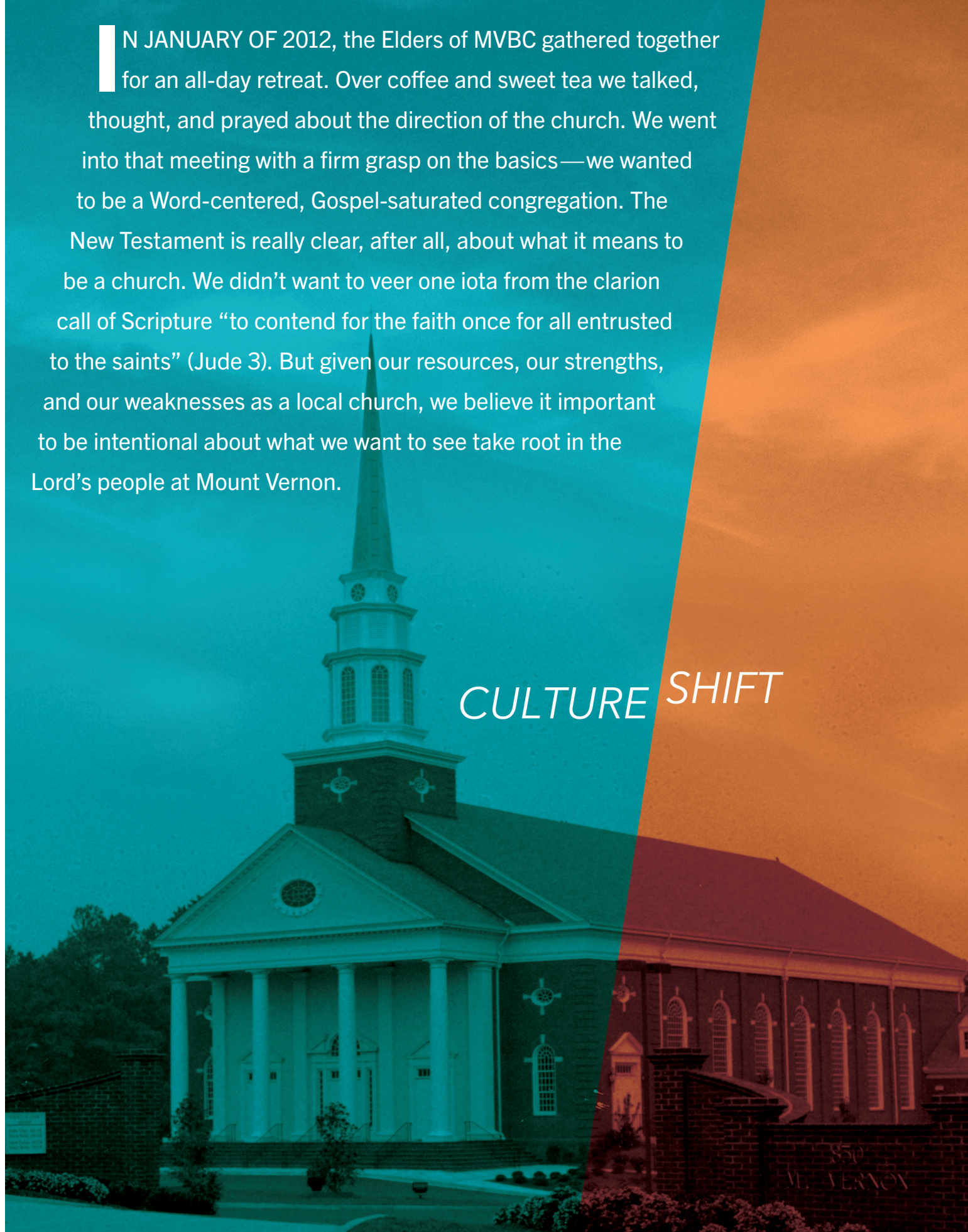


IN JANUARY OF 2012, the Elders of MVBC gathered together for an all-day retreat. Over coffee and sweet tea we talked, thought, and prayed about the direction of the church. We went into that meeting with a firm grasp on the basics—we wanted to be a Word-centered, Gospel-saturated congregation. The New Testament is really clear, after all, about what it means to be a church. We didn't want to veer one iota from the clarion call of Scripture "to contend for the faith once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). But given our resources, our strengths, and our weaknesses as a local church, we believe it important to be intentional about what we want to see take root in the Lord's people at Mount Vernon.

CULTURE *SHIFT*



So I asked the brothers one, simple question, “Where would you like mvbc to be in 2017?” That question led to a wonderful conversation as we dreamed together about the future of the church. When we left that winter evening, we had a clearer vision of what to do in the months ahead. And yet, at the time, a grand unveiling seemed unnecessary. Each goal was important, and yet, rather unremarkable. They just seemed so obvious (I hope you’ll agree!). And so we kept them for a time as a private document, regularly revisiting them in conversation and prayer. For about a year and a half, we chipped away at these roughly hewn goals.

Then, in July of 2013, we met again to revisit these goals. We remained convinced this was the direction we wanted to go. But in the preceding months we had matured as an Elder body; we approached each goal with a greater understanding of the church and of ourselves. We talked about them, tweaked them, and finally concluded that now was the time to share them with you.

The question we asked in July was the same, “Where do we want mvbc to be in 2017?” But we chose to frame each goal in terms of a culture-shift we want to see take place at mvbc. It’s easy to set goals for numbers—an increase in baptisms, in members, in mission trips, and so on. The more we spoke, the more we agreed numerical growth shouldn’t be our goal. *Instead, we aim to see the very culture of mvbc mature.*

But what is a culture? A culture is the customs, attitude, and ethos of a particular place or institution. Cities have a culture (“Madison is quaint”); families have a culture (“the Haubners are fun-loving”) and churches can have a culture, too. Just ask a thoughtful visitor who’s been at mvbc for a few weeks—they’ll tell you what the culture of our church is. It can be picked up from casual conversations as well as public teaching. Our culture signifies what we value. Without taking the centrality of the Gospel for granted, we sought to identify other values that we want to work on for the next few years. I want to lead us to be intentional about striving for a particular culture that honors the Lord, as we seek to follow Jesus with all our heart.

As you read over the following five “culture-shifts” we hope to see at mvbc, don’t be disappointed if the cultural change you were hoping for didn’t make the list. These five points aren’t exhaustive. And don’t be disappointed if they seem so plain. Our goal is to be biblical, not cutting edge. And so we hope to particularly grow in these areas over the course of the next few years. Please join us in praying that the Spirit would be at work in our midst, helping us to be a church that truly exists for the glory of God.

1. A CULTURE OF EVANGELISM

From the promise to Abram (Gen. 12:1–4) to the prayers of David (Psa. 22:27) to the command of Jesus (Matt. 28:16–20) to the preaching of the apostles (Rom. 1:5), it is clear that God is about the work of glorifying his name in all nations. If we are to be about his work, we must be about the work of evangelism.

Evangel is a Greek word that means Good News. An evangelist is someone who shares the Good News. This Good News is the truth that God has made a way for rebellious sinners who deserve his wrath and judgment to be saved. Jesus is the way. By trusting in his atoning death and resurrection (faith) by committing to live a life of holiness (repentance) we are saved. Evangelism is the act of bringing God’s Good News to others. It’s really the Best News ever told—we want to be marked by a passion to share it with others.

Like Paul, our ambition is to preach the Gospel where Christ has not yet been named (Rom. 15:20). We want to prayerfully and financially support the most faithful and gifted Christian workers laboring in the most desolate places. As Elders, we desire to lead mvbc to know whom we are supporting, to pray for them regularly, to give to

them faithfully, and to visit them as much as possible. Not only this, but may the Lord raise up a generation of missionaries to leave the safe confines of Atlanta for the sake of those who will not hear unless someone goes (Rom. 10:14).

A mature Christian doesn’t just grow personally; he helps others grow.

We strive to do all this without neglecting our neighbors right here in metro Atlanta (Mark 12:31). The sad truth is that in the twenty-first century one can grow up in the Bible Belt and still never hear the Gospel. So a culture of evangelism at mvbc means that this local church is profoundly committed to bringing the Good News to those unreached in Central Asia and those unreached in our backyard.

What can we do to encourage a culture of evangelism at mvbc?

- Most importantly, we want to keep preaching the Gospel, never assume it, and encourage all of our teachers to revisit the Gospel every time they teach. It’s been said that the Gospel is shallow enough for a toddler to wade in and deep enough for an adult to swim in. This is very true! So let’s not be ashamed to talk about it from the pulpit and in the nursery.
- We’d also like to see a *Sending mvbc* class start in 2014. We already require every new member to attend *Knowing mvbc*, a class about the basics of church membership. We plan to create a similar, four-hour class committed to the teaching the basics of missions, local and international, at mvbc.
- We hope to increase the exposure of every church member to the missions we support. The more you know about the ministries we are involved in, the more excited you’ll be to give and to go. You’ve already seen this in our monthly-missions emphasis popping up in your Sunday school. We are going to be even more deliberate in praying for international missions on Sunday evening.
- Let us be an evangelistic people. As Elders, we feel the responsibility to model personal evangelism. We will be holding each other accountable to get to know our neighbors, build relationships, and share the Good News ourselves. We know many of you are doing this already. Praise God! Pray that we would faithfully bring the gospel to bear in our workplaces and neighborhoods.
- Pray for our Deacons of International and Local Missions. They are instrumental in our congregational efforts to share the Gospel.

2. A CULTURE OF DISCIPLESHIP

Paul rebuked the church in Corinth for being full of “infants in Christ” (1 Cor. 3:1). The church is called here and elsewhere in Scripture to be mature (Eph. 4:13; Col. 1:28). Because the Great Commission is for every believer (Matt. 28:16–20), every member should be making disciples. This means more than evangelizing; it means helping those who have been converted to grow in their Christian faith. A mature Christian doesn’t just grow personally; he helps others grow.

Ultimately, Christian maturity is a work of the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:1–16). As Elders, we can encourage the flock to know, equip, and send one

another for the worship and glory of God. This requires church members who not only articulate the Gospel, but who work hard at applying this Gospel to their lives and others.

So when we say we want to see a culture of discipleship at MVBC, we mean we long for a church where we are helping one another grow as believers. We will never have enough staff or even enough elders to disciple every member of the body. That means you need to catch a vision for personally investing in the lives of other believers. As we see this happening more and more, we will have a culture of discipleship.

What can we do to encourage a culture of discipleship at MVBC?

- One place to start is with our new members. They come into the church hearing about the importance of personal discipleship in our *Knowing MVBC* membership class. We'd like to do a better job following up with these new members, ensuring that they have found the kind of Christian relationships necessary for the pursuit of maturity. Before a member can join, we ask him or her, "How do you plan on being discipled at MVBC?" Obviously, the expectation is that no one will be a lone-ranger Christian.
- But we don't want to focus only on the new members. So in the immediate future, the Elders plan to start the process of sitting down with every church member and hearing your personal testimony. This would look like one or two Elders paying a personal visit to you, and hearing your testimony. What a joy this will be!

Parents have the primary responsibility to teach, evangelize, befriend, and disciple their children.

- Mount Vernon will be blessed as we share practical stories of personal discipleship. In the *Perspective*, at a Sunday evening prayer meeting, on a Sunday morning, we can give you examples of ways members of Mount Vernon are investing in each other's lives. We want to uncover examples of God's grace in your life. How have you grown as a Christian? How did you get involved in a discipling relationship? How did you become convinced of the importance of being discipled? How has God used the church to encourage you in your spiritual growth? These are the kinds of questions that really show us how the Spirit is at work in our lives. These are the stories we want to share.
- Recently, I taught a class called *Equipping MVBC*—a nuts and bolts, four-hour class on the topic of discipling. In September 2013, one of our adult Sunday School classes is going to be devoted entirely to the topic of creating a culture of discipleship at MVBC. I pray this teaching will move us closer toward changing the culture of MVBC.

3. A CULTURE OF FAMILY CARE

Parents have the primary responsibility to teach, evangelize, befriend, and disciple their children (Deut. 6:4–9; Eph. 6:4). With the best of intentions, many churches have encouraged parents to outsource the spiritual development of their children to a church's preschool, elementary, or youth ministry. We don't want that to happen at MVBC.

Instead, we want to partner with parents for the spiritual health of all the children in our body. This means singles and married couples and retired couples and widows and widowers rolling up their sleeves and pouring their lives into kids. Family care means the entire family of MVBC standing shoulder to shoulder with our parents to reach the children in our midst. This requires an army of volunteers equipped with the tools they need to teach and filled with the love of God to pour into the lives of kids. We are working to ensure that every child at MVBC is known and equipped and every parent is encouraged and discipled.

Salvation is in the hands of the Lord, but we should expect every child at MVBC to graduate from high school with a deep understanding of the Gospel, a biblical worldview, and the ability to defend the faith. To do this, we need a culture of family care. This is a momentous task; it won't happen with the few hours children are on our church campus. And that's why we are praying for a culture of family care.

What can we do to encourage a culture of family care at MVBC?

- We begin by asking even more members to serve in the preschool, elementary, and youth ministries. Right now we are busting at the seams in the preschool ministry. We expect more kids in elementary and youth in the years ahead. The need for help is great.
- It is important to prepare one another for the joys and challenges of parenting. We hope to walk parents through several milestones of parenting. The world does a good job of helping parents understand the nuts and bolts of having a baby (*What To Expect When You're Expecting*). But there are spiritual factors to take into account, too. In the early years, parents are building a foundation they are not likely to veer from when they get older. Godly discipline needs to be addressed at a young age. As children get older, temptations increase. How do we help our little ones navigate a digital age? Many of our teens are on the cusp of making their faith their own. How do parents press the hearts of their teenagers deep into the Gospel? Clearly explained milestones can help.
- Parents often send their children or youth away on a mission trip. What if we send whole families to see what the Lord is doing in other parts of the city and even other parts of the world? Expect to see more opportunities for local and international family mission trips.
- Not every family is typical. There are kids with special needs, foster children, and adopted children. These families present unique opportunities to model the Gospel to an unbelieving world. We want to help such parents think through how the Lord might use them to model the gracious love of our heavenly Father in these difficult but wonderful situations. We also want to come alongside these parents and be a blessing to them as they serve their community.

4. A CULTURE OF GENEROSITY

For a number of different reasons, many Christians are uncomfortable talking about their personal, financial habits. Yet the Bible speaks a great deal about money. Jesus warned against hoarding (Matt. 6:19–21). Paul condemned the greedy (Eph. 4:19). We need to provide theologically-rooted, Gospel-centered counsel to members battling with hoarding and greed and wondering how they can manage their treasure on earth in a faithful, Christ-honoring way.

Sadly, many churches have created a culture of guilt by calling on people to give more without providing them biblical, Gospel reasons to give. Yes,

financial giving is a matter of obedience; those who are able but refuse to financially support the local church are sinning. Still, without softening our stance on the responsibility to give, we want to create a culture of generosity by teaching how love for God, love for each other, and love for the lost compels us to give. Though you can give without loving (1 Cor. 13:3) you cannot love without giving (2 Cor. 8:8).

But generosity is about more than finances. It is about time and relationships and possessions and service. A culture of generosity means that we do more than cut checks for missions, it means we give of our very selves to serve the Lord by serving one another.

What can we do to encourage a culture of generosity at MVBC?

- Last year, during *Equipping Matters*, one of our Elders taught a financial stewardship class. We would like to see every member take this class. Again and again, he emphasized that generosity is about what's going on in the heart. Men and women radically affected by the gospel will work hard to steward their resources well.
- The Scripture is full of calls to generosity. Our God is a God who gives. He gave us his Son, his Spirit, and he calls us to give our lives. Therefore we pray that the teaching at MVBC would be salted by the biblical call to generosity. Instead of a yearly "It's Time to Tithe" sermon, we want to see giving as part of the Gospel call in all our lives, a call that can be made from every text of Scripture.
- Again, stories are so helpful here. How have you trusted God in times of want? How has he shown himself faithful to you? We want those stories; we want to share them. The Lord can use those stories to encourage the whole body and to create a culture of generosity.

5. A CULTURE OF SERVING OTHER CHURCHES

As individuals, we have a responsibility to set a godly example for one another (Phil. 3:17; 1 Tim. 4:12). But Paul urged churches to be models for other churches, too. For example, he called upon the church in Corinth to model herself after the churches in Macedonia (2 Cor. 8:1–5). Therefore, we want MVBC to be a humble example for other churches.

Atlanta will never be reached by one, single congregation. If we genuinely love the lost in our own city and nation, we will make an investment in other churches, their pastors, and church leaders. We will do all we can to come alongside them, to learn from them when possible, and to teach them when able. This cause will demand our prayers, our time, and our resources.

One of the comments I hear most often when individuals join MVBC is how much they appreciate the way I pray for other churches and pastors in our area. Praying for other churches is a wonderful reminder that God is so much bigger than any one congregation. The Gospel demands we care about God's work everywhere, not merely where we can see it.

As Elders, we long to help create a culture where members are thankful, concerned, prayerful, and serving other churches. By God's grace, we can be a humble influence—using the gifts that God has given us to raise up godly pastors, encourage established churches, and even plant churches.

How can we encourage a culture of serving other churches at MVBC?

- One way is to establish an internship program where men training for pastoral ministry can gain an insider's look at church life. Lord willing, those who come through such a program will move on to lead churches who will, themselves, create a culture of serving other churches. To move toward this goal, we have recommended that we start to plan for an internship program in our direct missions budget.
- March of 2014 will mark the second year of our own church leaders conference right here in Atlanta, *Feed My Sheep*. The goal is to bring local churches together for encouragement and instruction. I would love the entire congregation of MVBC to embrace this conference as *our* ministry to local churches in the area.
- Twelve years ago, MVBC was a founding member in the Atlanta Association of Southern Baptist Churches. This month, the Association will be re-named the Greater Atlanta Baptist Network (GABN). Bryan Pillsbury and I are both leaders of the GABN. We hope that in the years ahead, MVBC will continue to play an active role in this network of churches seeking to plant the Gospel in our community and beyond.

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Evangelism. Discipleship. Family care. Generosity. Serving other churches. By 2017 (or before!) we'd love MVBC to be so marked by these five traits, that it's obvious to every member and every visitor that the Gospel leads us to share the Gospel regularly (evangelism), disciple one another fervently (discipleship), invest in our children practically (family care), give sacrificially (generosity), and know our church neighbors deeply (serving other churches). Should we aspire to more in the years ahead? Of course! Let us be a church marked by humility, kindness, hospitality, and mercy, too.

What happens in 2017? Lord willing, by then, we will already have evaluated where we are, and have prayerfully put our heads together to see where we ought to be in 2022, should the Lord tarry. ■

~ Aaron Menikoff