

This past week our church approved the financial forecast for the 2007-2008 ministry year. While we don't typically discuss church finances on Sunday morning, because it is family business, today it is appropriate because this forecast is a spiritual document for us. It represents the finances that God brings to us through the people of Stonecreek, as well as represents how we plan to manage our resources to continue to connect with people and lead them into an authentic and growing relationship with Jesus Christ.

The offering is our expression of faith to God in a tangible way. We pass the offering basket as an act of worship to God. God calls us to be percentage, priority, and progressive givers.

Some of you give online. I'd encourage you to place an envelope in the basket with your name, email address, "online giving," and the amount.

If we'll trust God with our money, we'll trust him with just about anything else. We take it up as an act of worship. Everything belongs to God, and we are just returning to him a portion of that.

Our forecast is for \$1.75M. On behalf of those who benefit from your generosity, I want to thank so many of you who currently give. Whether it is someone who has been baptized through our ministries, a missionary or pastor who is supported through Stonecreek, you have been faithful to express your generosity to God through your contributions.

We share in the privilege, as well as the responsibility. As with many growing churches, our vision and needs are outpacing our resources when it comes to ministry operations spending. It seems, though, that the gap we are currently seeing needs to be closed. Our *Raise Your Game* campaign for capital improvements is going at a moderate clip, and we are making the improvements that *Raise Your Game* is intended to accomplish. But ministry operations needs to pick up.

I believe over this next year it is time to see our ministry operations giving exceed the \$2.0M mark. We need to put our foot on the accelerator. In Scripture, we see that all who have made a decision to attend a certain congregation share in the privilege of giving to see lives changed. When we stand before God, our generosity will be rewarded.

We see in the early church they gave to the vision of seeing people come to Christ, and also to meet the needs of the local congregation. These both go together. Our vision is for people to understand the freedom that comes through generosity. But people ask, how generous do I need to be? In other words, what is our starting point as a church? I hesitate to give specific numbers, because we trust God to work in people's lives in order to provide for Stonecreek's ministries. However, as a starting point, a \$50/week increase from the families that call Stonecreek home could help us in expanding our vision.

I realize that for a single mom who is holding down a full time job while taking classes, or someone who has currently faced a job loss, \$50/month is overwhelming. On the other hand, you may have been blessed more than usual, and you can pick up the amount for 2, 5, or even 10 families.

A growing church is always facing the tension of needs and vision outpacing resources. Some can say about our current gap: it's the economy, people are giving to the campaign instead of the budget, or the financial growth is always behind the numerical growth, etc. There can be reasons and excuses all day long.

If I make excuses, I settle for mediocrity. You don't want to settle for mediocrity in your personal life. I don't think people want to be part of an organization or church that settles for mediocrity. I want you to know, that you don't have a pastor who will let us settle for mediocrity.

Our mission is life-changing and live-saving. When it comes to what we do, there are no acceptable losses.

We are playing to win, not just to get by. We are playing to expand, not just to stand still. We are playing to see lives changed. As a tangible reminder of why we give, I've got a story I would like to share. As you read this story, remember, YOU are making the difference.

For close to 30 years I tried to do it myself. I searched all over for answers but just kept coming up empty. Empty inside, like, "Is this all there is?" Then about 18 months ago things started to change. I entered into a business with a relative. A cousin that I had grew up with but that I didn't know as an adult. He shared with me that the last 20 years of his life had been great – even to the point that he had thought this must be what Heaven is like. For those 20 years he had focused on his faith, his wife and his family. During that same time I had focused on building businesses and somehow hoping that the rest of my life would just fall in place. I was wrong. I was miserable.

Stonecreek

My wife wanted me to attend church. I appeased her and agreed to come to Stonecreek. It was tough but I kept coming back. This pastor kept hitting me in the gut every Sunday morning. At one service he asked almost in wonderment, "Why is it that when people need help the most that they don't come to church?" I wanted to tell him, "I know why – because it feels like you're getting your butt kicked!" Eventually the messages stopped stinging so much. I began taking a journal to church to take notes. I started reading the bible (NIV – The Devotional Bible for Dads) according to one of the plans Steven suggested. For the first time in my life the stories made sense. We began making all sorts of small changes. My kids started requesting "Christian" songs in the car!

My business however continued to spiral downward creating more and more stress. It seemed that I couldn't do anything right. And it seemed that although I was praying vigorously, I just wasn't ready to hear God. The business closed and I've been struggling for the past 6 months to find a job. Strangely though the stress has been less than it was a couple of years ago. Unfortunately, through all this time one constant has been my mechanism for dealing with life – alcohol. I drank too much, pure and simple. Always had. One service the pastor encouraged us to invite the "Neighborhood Drunk" to church. I thought, "Dude, I'm already here." But it was at that moment that I realized that other people in my neighborhood were probably calling me the "neighborhood drunk."

Epiphany

I've always known that God has a plan for me. Never questioned that it existed just didn't have a clue what it was. There is NO other explanation for taking such good care of me and all the blessing He has given me through the years. A recent Saturday night I awoke at 2am. My head was filled with all the things that I didn't want to be (or be known for). I'm not usually motivated by negativity but the list just blew me away. The next morning I shared this with my wife. Who had, unknown to me, taken down all the pictures of me and her in our bedroom. This was my last chance at my marriage. God had gotten my attention and blessed me with this epiphany. Later that day I searched out a book to read and again God put the answer in my hand.

Today

It's taken many events to bring me to this place where I feel huge positive changes taking place. Some of these are:

- *The love of my wife*
- *Inspiration provided by my cousin*

- *The duty to lead my family*
- *The view of God as The Father*
- *The guidance of Stonecreek*

Last Wednesday night as I prayed before bed I told God that I had to have something tomorrow. I said that my wife was at her wits end and I had to have something the next day. Thursday evening I received His answer in the form of an e-mail from a prospective employer to schedule an interview for what just may be my dream job. Now if He can just move it up before October 17th!

There is so much more I want to say. I just want you to know the difference that Stonecreek is making in my life.