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CHURCH

# BMH BOOKS

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### Corporation Meeting

Get the latest updates on how God is using GraceConnect to build bridges of communication in the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches!

Tuesday, July 25, 2017 at 7:30am  
Student Center, Grace Community Church  
900 Smith Road, Fremont, Ohio 43420

The meeting is in conjunction with the national conference of the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches, Access 2017

A ticket is required for the breakfast meeting. The subsidized cost is \$8 USD and the ticket may be purchased at [access2017.com](http://access2017.com).

If you are not able to attend the breakfast, the corporation meeting will begin at approximately 8:15 a.m.

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**GraceConnect**, founded in January 2004 as *FGBC World*, is published four times a year by the Brethren Missionary Herald Company (BMH), a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization affiliated with the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches (FGBC). The publication's mission is to nurture Great Commission teamwork by connecting people and churches of the FGBC. Inclusion of an article or advertisement does not necessarily indicate endorsement by the Brethren Missionary Herald Company or the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches.

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## DYNAMIC AND LIVING

For many of us, church is foundational in our lives – not a wall to keep others out, but a support to lean on when times get tough.



### **I find it interesting that Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, wants the social media platform to be more like a church.**

“Essentially, he wants Facebook to be a place where people come together to establish real community, accomplish great things together and let leaders emerge who can influence followers to impact culture and society,” reported *Relevant* magazine in an online article on June 27.

It sounds great, but he leaves out the whole purpose for people coming together at church – to worship God, to learn more about Him, and to fellowship with one another.

“When Christians come together there is a faith element that turns the church from a mere social club into something dynamic and living,” writes Tim Boal in *Building Authentic Community* (BMH Books 2006 out-of-print). “The first ingredient in a church is a group of believers, those who have expressed faith in Jesus Christ.”

For many of us, church is foundational in our lives – not a wall to keep others out, but a support to lean on when times get tough.

Those of us in the Grace Brethren movement have been coming together for worship, fellowship, and service for more than 75 years in communities all over North America. Once a year, we gather for what feels like a family reunion at national conference. This summer is no different as we get together in Fremont, Ohio, for three days of all-Access information that will help professional and lay staff be more effective in ministry.

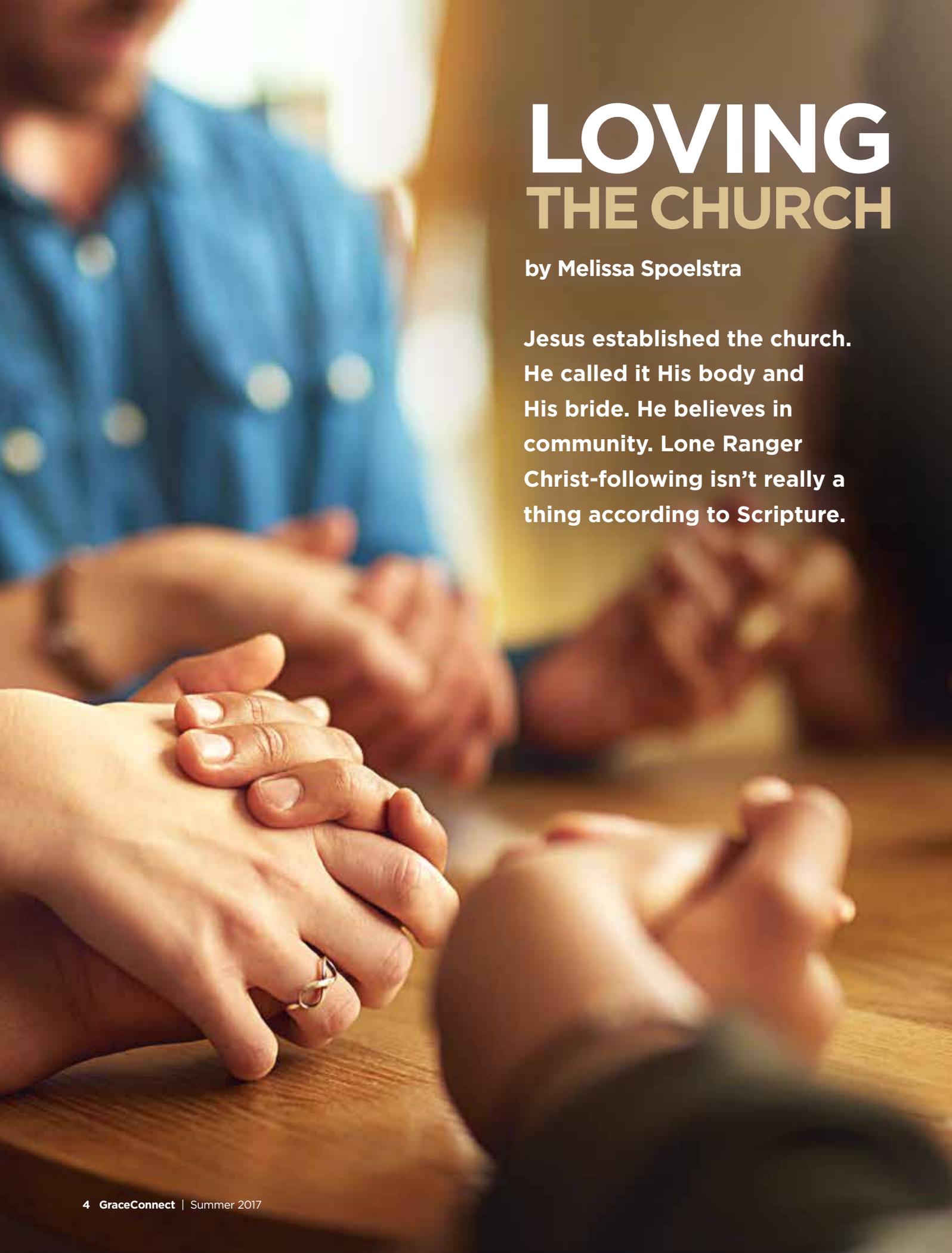
In addition to connecting with others who minister in Grace Brethren congregations in the U.S. and Canada, you’ll have opportunity to learn more about the national and cooperating ministries of the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches. See the schedule at [access2017.com](http://access2017.com) and follow along at [GraceConnect.us](http://GraceConnect.us) (and on our Facebook page) during July 25-27.

At GraceConnect, we want to nurture Great Commission teamwork among the people and churches of the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches by building bridges of communication. In 2018, you’ll have an opportunity to nurture some of those relationships by joining friends of GraceConnect on a study tour of Israel with Dr. Randy Smith. For 12 days in March, Randy will help you connect with the land of the Bible in new and fresh ways. Learn more about this opportunity at [graceconnect.us/connect-with-the-land-of-the-bible/](http://graceconnect.us/connect-with-the-land-of-the-bible/).

It all comes down to the fact that there are many ways to be church – whether it is coming alongside someone in time of crisis or joining together on a grander scale to learn how to be more effective in ministry. It’s more than a social club. It’s dynamic and living – and foundational.



*Liz Cutler Gates, [lcutler@bmbhbooks.com](mailto:lcutler@bmbhbooks.com), is the editor of Grace Connect. Since 2010, she has served as executive director of the Brethren Missionary Herald Company. She and her husband, Doug, live in Warsaw, Ind.*



# LOVING THE CHURCH

by Melissa Spoelstra

Jesus established the church. He called it His body and His bride. He believes in community. Lone Ranger Christ-following isn't really a thing according to Scripture.

## NOW I'M NOT WEARING ROSE-COLORED GLASSES. OTHER CHRISTIANS HAVE HURT ME DEEPLY, BUT OTHER TIMES THEY HAVE HELD ME UP WHEN I THOUGHT I COULDN'T GO ON.



I can honestly say, “I love our church.” I don’t mean the building. (It kinda’ smells because it’s old and it is a preschool during the week.)

I’m also not referring to the service on Sundays. I love the worship, testimonies, and ordinances we partake in there, but the church is not a place or an event. It is us. Now I’m not wearing rose-colored glasses. Other Christians have hurt me deeply, but other times they have held me up when I thought I couldn’t go on.

I have met many wounded church people. Someone said, “There is no pain like church pain.” I agree as some of my deepest hurts involved other believers. However, we can’t give up on each other because Jesus established the church. He called it His body and His bride. He believes in community. Lone Ranger Christ-following isn’t really a thing according to Scripture.

I remember one time when our daughter Abby first began to lose her hair [as she battled alopecia]. Our church family showered us with help, prayer, and encouragement. They seemed to anticipate our needs even before we realized them. It was clear many had endured their own trials and knew just how to help and what to say (or not to say). Through hats, notes of encouragement, and prayers, God’s love was fleshed out through the body of Christ—just as He designed. Those expressions were God’s grace and source of strength

to us in moments of despair. We saw Jesus in our church family.

**A**s we model for our others a commitment to community in the good and bad times, we’ll find blessings in the midst of the pain. Still, we must continually guard against participating in community solely for our own benefit. So many times, I’ve heard statements like:

- “No one from church came to see me or called me.” (Did they know you were sick or struggling?)
- “I don’t feel connected. Nobody talks to me.” (Do you participate in a smaller group setting? Sometimes in a large group it’s difficult to get to know people. Have you made efforts to talk to others, or are you waiting for them to talk to you?)
- “Why don’t we have this or that ministry or connection opportunity?” (Are you willing to put in the time and effort to help make the change you want to see in your church?)
- “I don’t like the music [preaching, lights, temperature] at church.” (Have you lost sight of what matters? Church is about worshipping God and fellowshiping with other believers—for their benefit as well as yours—not personally approving of every aspect.)

As parents, we have to remember that little ears are often listening when conversations regarding church take place. You may think they aren’t

hearing and internalizing in the back of the car or at the dinner table, but they are. And your attitude toward church will impact theirs.

If you have issues with your church, remember to start at the top! Christ is the head of the body. Spend some time in his presence asking for direction and help. We know through the Epistles that the early church had problems just as we have in our churches today. As Christians were often oppressed in those days, they found strength in numbers; they stuck together and worked out their differences. Is it ever appropriate to leave a church for a new one? Of course. But sometimes people head for a new church without trying to work out their problems with leaders or other congregants. It can be easier to avoid than to confront issues, but Jesus tells us that community is worth it.

**H**ow do you approach your church community? Has any consumer thinking crept into your posture toward being a part of the body? Ask God to help you model for your children and others around you a love for God’s body!

*Editor’s Note: A popular women’s conference speaker and Bible teacher, Melissa Spoelstra is the author of Jeremiah: Daring to Hope in an Unstable World (Abingdon Press, 2014) and Joseph: The Journey to Forgiveness (Abingdon Press, 2016). Her husband, Sean, is pastor of Encounter Church, a Grace Brethren congregation in Dublin, Ohio, where they live with their four children.*

# THE DANGER IN BEING SPECTACULAR



**What if we are  
focusing on being  
spectacular rather  
than focusing on  
the one who is  
spectacular?**

**by Jeff Bogue**

## **And The 'Best Church' Award Goes To...**

In Revelation, Jesus gave a report to the church in Ephesus who had great morals, excellent social justice efforts, sound doctrine, and high ratings.

*I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. (Revelation 2:2-3 NIV)*

Maybe you're a pastor or leader who believes your church could certainly earn that report from Jesus. That's great! If your leadership has remained faithful to God, chances are you've seen signs of health, growth, and effectiveness over the years. Perhaps you're even proud of your church for standing for the right things, for the right reasons, in many of the right ways, while being culturally relevant and mission-minded. What a great thing!

In fact, I'd describe the church I pastor as meeting those criteria. I am very proud of them and don't worry about my congregation being swept off into falsehood. I admire their Biblical strength and effectiveness for the Gospel. I'm certain the elders and leaders are able to recognize false teaching. I have seen the church successfully connect to and reach our community. There's no concern of disunity, lack of faith or sacrifice. I don't worry about these things because I have seen the church respond to difficult situations, quite literally, for decades. I know our deeds, hard work, perseverance, and values. The way our church loves people in Jesus' name is evident. I am so proud of their faith and sacrifice.

I am sure that when Jesus started to give this report to the church in Ephesus, they were feeling great. Who wouldn't be? I bet they were proud of their accomplishments and happy at the thought that they were pleasing God. After all, they didn't get here by accident. All those accomplishments had taken blood, sweat, and tears over a long period.

## **When Our Service Displaces Our Love**

As Jesus finished his report, I imagine a general feeling of nauseating shock in the room.

# IF OUR FOCUS SHIFTS FROM KNOWING JESUS TO SOLELY SERVING JESUS, WE CAN EASILY CONFUSE OUR SERVICE FOR OUR LOVE.



*Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.*  
(Revelation 2:4-5 NIV)

As a first response, I'm sure it was easy to think, *What more in the world could God possibly want? This church has the envy of every other church! What is the problem here? I work like a dog. I get one day off a week, and I get up early to make coffee for the church before I even drink a cup myself! How is that forsaking love for God? How is it that I have 'fallen'? Am I supposed to repent for not doing even more things to please God? This God is impossible to please!*

In my upbringing, I was missing one very important truth. It wasn't until a friend explained this truth to me in my 20's that my life completely changed. Are you ready for it? **Truth: God does not want more service; he does not want us to follow more rules or make more sacrifices. What God wants and craves is our love.** This was a surprise to me. *Seriously? He just wants our love?* Jesus said the greatest commandments are to love your God and love people and that all other commandments hang on those two.

David understood this. Even though he messed up, God called him a man after his own heart. David knew there was no point in trying to please God through his accomplishments. Instead, he acknowledged God for who he is and expressed his awe, love, and gratitude by first giving God his heart rather than his actions.

*Open my lips, Lord,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.  
You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;  
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.  
My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart  
you, God, will not despise.*  
(Psalm 51:15-17)

So maybe you're not currently having a rebellious "David moment," but are being faithful, true, righteous and successful at ministry. You hit the numbers and have the thriving programs to prove it. Jesus would still say (as he

did to the church in Ephesus), *I don't want that. It's not what I ever wanted. I want you to know me and love me.*

**If our focus shifts from knowing Jesus to solely serving Jesus, we can easily confuse our service for our love (which are two very different things).**

We will get busy, run around like crazy people, and try to prove to God that we love him through our involvement with good things. All this time, we will be losing sight of God's heart and mind, and who we fell in love with at first.

This gets confusing because you can have thousands of people coming to services, volunteering, and paying you compliments, but that's not the scope of how God measures health. *This* is the danger in being spectacular, that a corpse with makeup on can be overlooked as being healthy.

When you are doing good *things*, there's a real temptation to think that *you* are doing great. But it's possible that God is doing great things, and your heart doesn't match. **Great deeds are not the metric for a pure heart.**

It is possible to be incredibly faithful to God's word, lead others, stand up for what's right, exercise appropriate church discipline, proclaim the truth, face false teachers, and still be missing the mark. The fact is, what God wants is our hearts.

## My Greatest Fear

My greatest fear for myself and the church is not associated with poor performance. My greatest fear is related to the foundation of our relationship with Christ himself. I lay awake at night asking God not to let me go down the same road as the church in Ephesus.

Jesus is evaluating his church and his followers right now. For real! It's not just something written in the Bible to scare us into behaving, or just about receiving crowns later in heaven. God's heart plays out today. Think about the lampstands in Revelation. God told the church in Ephesus that if their love continued to wane, he would remove his lampstand. The lampstand here represents God's blessing, power, and presence.

MAYBE THE ISSUE IS NOT  
WHAT I'M DOING, BUT WHAT'S  
MOTIVATING ME TO DO IT.

Chances are if you are reading this article you are looking for ways to improve your ministry; you are not neglecting the church, and you are certainly not sabotaging it. During God's evaluation, you are most likely not the type of person to be found guilty of opposing God or his people, but rather, will be praised for your efforts. The terror that occupies my mind is this thought: *What if spectacular people, who are completely loyal to God, could be found guilty of something else? What if we could be found guilty of losing sight of our first love and as a result, end up losing God's presence? What if we are focusing on being spectacular rather than focusing on the one who is spectacular?*

My fear is that my relationship with Christ will become a set of actions and beliefs instead of the core passion of my heart. That "Jesus stuff" would become my job, my career,

and just what I do every day. I fear I would know how to run a church and lead a staff, how to stay relevant, how to manage budgets, and how raise money in a spectacular way, but not be captivated in the least by the person of Jesus.

Maybe my competency in my profession is not shaky, but what about what compels me to do it? Maybe the issue is not *what* I'm doing, but *what's motivating me* to do it.

### First Love = First Job

In the kingdom of God, the leader's primary responsibility is not to lead, but to follow. **Out of our follow-ship of Christ, our leadership arrives.** Our first job is not sound doctrine or good theology; our first job is to love our Lord. When we love him, everything else is empowered by that.



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# OUR BREADTH OF LEADERSHIP WILL ALWAYS BE LIMITED TO THE DEPTH OF OUR LOVE.



My first job as a husband, boss, employee, and neighbor, is to love my Lord. Our job as leaders is to teach people to follow Christ. And the only way to teach that lesson is through the example of our lives.

I want to love and follow Jesus Christ. What he chooses to accomplish through me is up to him. God creates for himself what he determines.

## The Starting Point

I bet your church started with a passion for what it means to be a church. If you're like our church, you took a hard look at scripture, looking to God for who you should be, sorting out his thoughts and passions for you. We were mesmerized by God and what he had done for us. We went "all in" and did what we did for Jesus, out of our love for him.

Our church's goals and strategies were never meant to drive us; they were just ways to organize what it meant to know and follow Christ. Philosophies and strategies were created to communicate what we learned about the heart and mind of God. Our ministries and even our relationships with Christ started with wanting to *know* God.

Do you remember being so dependent on God, asking him to use you and tell you what to do, and being passionate to proclaim his love? Your passion originated and extended from Christ's heart.

Our love for Christ is directly related to the fierceness of his presence in our lives. **Our breadth of leadership will always be limited to the depth of our love.** When we follow Jesus with a love of abandon, he will give us the desires of our heart that we had at first. He will provide us with incredible opportunities to grow his kingdom and minister to people in need. We won't have to produce it on our own.

It's time to write the sermon, go to another meeting, and plan another trip. God doesn't need to be involved for those things to happen. But for lives to be rescued, addictions to be broken, and marriages to be saved, only God's presence can do that. The crazier thing is that God

doesn't need our help, but welcomes us into the process for his glory and our fulfillment.

## Avoiding the Danger

Occasionally, I try to stop whatever I am doing and look back at my first love. I build into my routine times to stop and remember what I am doing so I can get rid of distractions. I think about my distractions- the things I love the most that aren't God.

If you want to know what you love the most, all you need to do is think about what you think about most, listen to what you talk about the most, look at what you spend the most time on, and look at where your money goes. This will define your first love.

Let's use preparing a sermon as the example. If I spend 20 hours on a sermon but fail to discover the heart of God in a passage, I have missed the opportunity to communicate the heart and mind of God to the people he loves. If I spend all my time understanding the history and theology of a passage, but never grasp how God wants to change *me* through it. I would do the work of God, but not communicate the heart of God. It's when I allow the Holy Spirit to convict me, am broken by my own sin, and allow Christ to shape my dreams and alleviate my fears, that I'm spending time with my first love and am prepared to speak from his heart to the heart of the people listening to me.

Whether you are preparing a sermon as a pastor, getting ready to lead youth group as a volunteer, leading and discipling your children as a parent, our job as a spiritual leader is to help the heart of God connect to the heart of the people he so deeply loves.

It's fascinating that when we connect to our first love, instead of trying to remember or manufacture what we need to do with the church, our hearts supernaturally beat with God's passions as he works through us. When he guides us, empowers us, and stills our souls, we're connected back to our love and do what we did at first.

My prayer is that we would be spectacular conduits of the heart and mind of our Lord.

# SEVEN KEYS FOR PASTORAL SUCCESS

by John McIntosh

**A leader should not assume those in the church feel loved. The leaders of your congregation, the men with whom you serve, should be willing to give you the honest truth about whether the charity message is communicated.**



LEARNING CONTENTMENT IS VITAL TO A PASTOR. FOR SURE A MAN WILL NOT BE CONTENT IN A LARGE CONGREGATION IF HE HAS NOT LEARNED IT IN A SMALL ONE. GREAT CHURCHES ARE NOT DEFINED BY ATTENDANCES AND OFFERINGS.



I was nine years old and attending Clear Lake Camp nestled in the Cascade Mountains of the Pacific Northwest. Sitting on a log positioned around a Friday evening campfire, I felt the heavy darkness of the nighttime mountains. It was decision-making time.

I don't remember who the pastor was, but he talked on the crucifixion of Christ. In my mind, I saw Jesus suffer and die. Barabbas was running through the streets of Jerusalem yelling, "He died for me, He died for me!" It was a paralyzing moment.

Since then, I have sensed that the rest of time given to me on this earth was not mine to claim. Because He died for me, all I was, all I had belonged to Jesus.

That was more than 40 years ago. Today I look back at over a lifetime of pastoral ministry. A couple of things have surfaced that would help pastors who will take my place. They are listed in no particular order: preaching, loving, growing, delegating, being an example, and very important, loyalty and entrusting.

### Preaching

People who come to church on Sunday morning do not want to know about the preacher's rough week. They come reaching for hope in processing the issues the Lord has assigned them. It has been said that ... "a pastor who preaches to broken hearts will never want for an audience."

While in seminary my wife and I attended a pastor's conference held at the Grace Brethren Church in Columbus, Ohio. There I heard, "Your people will forgive you for anything but your inability to preach." I've worked hard to have my stuff together Sunday morning. I've never had an excuse for being unprepared for prime time. People hear God speak to them through the voice of their pastor.

### Loving

Most people in the church who feel loved and respected will follow pastoral leadership. Effective, shared, and well-ordered ministry that impacts the lives of those in the church needs to be encouraged and affirmed. Everyone likes to know when they have done a good job. These kind words must be regularly expressed by the pastor.

Again, from that Columbus conference, another Ohio pastor told us, "People will forgive you for anything but your unwillingness to love them." A leader should not assume those in the church feel loved. The leaders of your congregation, the men with whom you serve, should be willing to give you the honest truth about whether the charity message is communicated.

### Growing

Reflecting on years of pastoral ministry, Joe McKeever wrote: "Bigness is overrated." He is right. I've had the opportunity to serve in churches large and small. Both have special blessings both create unique challenges. Many young men feel their gifts are being untapped. They live with a longing for bigger challenges.

Remember, the sovereign God knows where we are. But He has never been impressed with numbers (Judges 7). Learning contentment is vital to a pastor. For sure a man will not be content in a large congregation if he has not learned it in a small one. Great churches are not defined by attendances and offerings.

### Delegating

Pastors who believe they are responsible for all the preaching, all the calling and all the counseling are foolish. Jethro made that clear to his son-in-law Moses that he didn't have to do everything (Exodus 18). Pastors who

**"Southeast Asia has one of the highest rates of child trafficking in the world. The scope of the problem is huge."**



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IT IS GOOD IF A MAN HAS A PLACE TO VENT.  
IT IS GOOD IF A PASTOR CAN CONFIDE  
HIS STRUGGLES TO A TRUSTED FRIEND.



try to do it all become victims of discouragement and depression. I know. I've been there. Sometimes pastors rob other gifted folks who want or need to serve. Pastors who try to do it all will find their effectiveness compromised.

Events and ministries that involve several people in the planning and execution produce greater excitement and reward.

### Being an Example

It has been said that a pastor can't take his congregation anywhere he is unwilling to go. Paul told Timothy: ... "in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe" (1 Timothy 4:12b NASB).

God gives all His saints something to carry in this life. Each has their sad stories to tell. We have pain in marriage, family and outside relationships. We have sickness, sorrow, and disappointment. Pastors are not excluded. People in the church watch how we carry our thorns and thistles.

It is good if a man has a place to vent. It is good if a pastor can confide his struggles to a trusted friend. But know for certain, people in the church learn to manage the trials of life by what they learn from their pastor. We never forget we are "an example of those who believe."

### Loyal

The overseers, the leaders, are the pastor's eyes and ears in the church. Overseers need to understand they see and hear things the pastor will never get wind of. Each leader needs to guard the other's back. I called the men on the board, my "Wingmen." I needed their loyalty in those unanticipated carnal conversations in the lobby. I needed to know they would defend me. If it is not requested, it is not considered.

How many of us have heard, "A lot of people have come to me" ... Why would a person say something like that? It is to make others believe this is a significant issue in the church. Pastors should always insist on names. More often than not, "A lot of people" amount to a man's wife and his brother-in-law. Honesty in leadership breeds loyalty.

### Entrusting

"Success without successors is failure," writes Hans Finzel, former president and CEO of the international non-profit WorldVenture. He says that a forward-looking pastor needs to be ... "planning his departure the day he begins."

I've been told that police involved in a pursuit need two sets of eyes. The eyes of the driver are looking at the immediate traffic obstacles. The eyes of his partner are looking far down the road, anticipating what is coming. It is called, "the high visual horizon." The expression refers to the importance of keeping one's focus on the goal.

Several years ago, I was riding my motorcycle with a group of friends. Just outside of Carmel, Calif., I tried to make my Harley do something it didn't want to do. It bucked me off. After a short flight over the handlebars, I got an ambulance ride but experienced no serious injury. In hindsight, I remember the rider in front of me losing something off his bike and my eyes focused on that object. My attention was turned from looking ahead, and I became dangerously focused on an insignificant event in the immediate. I went down.

Pastors do this all the time. They are focused on the short-term and forget they are only temporary. When they retire or when they move on to another church, the congregation is left to fend for themselves. I did it once. I vowed by God's grace to never do it again.

To Timothy, Paul wrote: "The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2 NASB).

When this great Apostle responded to his upward calling, Timothy and Titus were ready to take his place. Just like Moses, when taken to heaven he was replaced by Joshua. There are Elijah and Elisha. "Success without successors is failure."

*Editor's Note: John McIntosh is senior pastor at Grace Church in Ripon, Calif. He has also served Grace Brethren congregations in Simi Valley, Calif., and Mabton, Wash.*

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# ACCESS

## THE FGBC NETWORK by Keith Minier

I have heard it said that your real net worth is your network. If that is true than those of us in the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches (FGBC) are wealthy beyond measure – or at least we have the potential to be.

One of the greatest privileges and benefits of a network like the FGBC are the relationships that have existed, do exist, or could exist among those who call this tribe their home. Anyone who is willing to be intentional to reach out, humble to receive help and committed to serving others will find that our spiritual family is a treasure chest of blessing.

I know I have experienced this gift more times than I can even count in my nearly 13 years as a Grace Brethren pastor. Brothers and sisters have prayed and served with me, and taught, counseled, and led me in ministry. I have also had the chance to do the same to many others. What a privilege to be in a spiritual family that is full of rich Biblical content, and where there is access to the people who are trained with that knowledge and have a commitment to fulfill God's mission. Many of my ministry colleagues who are not part of the FGBC have shared how they would benefit from having such people in their lives.

We will be gathering as a family of churches from July 25-27 in Fremont, Ohio for the national FGBC conference, Access.

Access is an opportunity to capitalize on this incredible network and is designed for our tribe to take advantage of our greatest strength as a spiritual movement -- each other. The purpose is to connect ministry leaders with other ministry leaders and practitioners in areas of current focus or future ministry. The FGBC has an abundance of technology talent and practitioners who often have not had space to connect



and bless each other. The same goes for many in other local church ministries. Access is an opportunity to grow not just our content file, but our contact files, as well.

I encourage you to participate in Access this summer. Make it possible for your ministry team, whether paid or volunteer, to attend Access with you.

Register for conference at [access2017.com](http://access2017.com).

I believe you and your team will be grateful the type of access to content and contacts that this conference will create.

*Editor's Note: Keith Minier is the coordinator for Access 2017, the national conference of the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches. He has served as Lead Pastor at Grace Fellowship, Pickerington, Ohio, since he left a career as a chemist in 2004. In that time, he's led the church through a tremendous move of God as the church has grown from a weekly attendance of 70 to a movement of more than 3,000.*

# CLOSE TO HOME: EZRA BIBLE INSTITUTE

“My conviction had always been to try to help other folks have the opportunity to study and train for ministry without having to make a big move.”

Adam Copenhaver, lead pastor of the Grace Brethren Church in Mabton, Wash., recognized the need for more opportunities for biblical training in the Washington’s Yakima Valley while he was pastoring the Grace Brethren Church in Yakima about ten years ago. It has been on his radar ever since.

“I wanted to return to school and realized the only way to do that is to sell my home, quit my job, and move across the country,” he recalls. “And in central Washington, there’s a dark hole when it comes to Christian colleges and seminaries. I wanted to do something about it.”

He reached out to area pastors, who, at Copenhaver’s prompting, gathered together to establish the Ezra Bible Institute, a local, college-level resource for lay leaders, in the fall of 2014. Modeled after the example set in Ezra 7:10, the institute exists to study, obey, and teach God’s word. Structured as a three-year program broken into ten modules of weekly classes, it aims to be accessible to church leaders who are already established, but are looking for more theological training while continuing their jobs in their communities.

Since the Institute was created with the cooperation of several area churches, the content draws from several denominations

that fall under a common statement of faith, including Grace Brethren, Nazarene, Christian Reformed, and Presbyterian. Gregory Howell, board member and pastor of Community Grace Brethren Church in Goldendale, Wash., says the diversity of doctrinal ideas is welcome.

“We’re not trying to do hobbyhorses or our doctrine only. We’re supposed to be inclusive and either [lay out] several views or invite in guest speakers for certain perspectives.”

Currently, the Institute offers a ten-course program, taught by pastors who all hold terminal degrees, either D.Min. or Ph.D. Sixteen students are taking courses, and five are working their way through the whole program.

Copenhaver says he doesn’t know what the future holds yet. “Right now, we feel like we’ve got our finger on a need that we’re trying to meet with these lay folks, and they’re not looking for accredited degrees. They’re already in careers and just looking to be better equipped for serving the church.”

Howell agrees. “I’m privileged to be a part of it. I think some of my gifting is teaching, and Ezra Institute gives me an outlet and still be a local pastor. I’m excited about it.”

*This story first appeared in the GraceConnect eNews, a weekly newsletter that shares what God is doing in the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches. Subscribe online at [graceconnect.us/subscribe/](http://graceconnect.us/subscribe/).*