

# Our Discipleship Pathway, Part 1: GATHER

Hebrews 10:23-25 on September 8, 2024

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*Please read Hebrews 10:23-25 before going further in this transcript.*

Today's a special day in the life of our church. Not only is this our Fall Kick-off, but it's also the kick-off of our new Strategic Ministry Plan. This is something that we've been praying about as a church for over a year, ever since our elders first recommended it, and our congregation got behind it. Before we dive into what we're calling "Our Discipleship Pathway," let's begin by addressing a question that some of us may be wondering about: Why? Why are we spending time on a Strategic Ministry Plan? Why don't we just move on to our sermon series on the Gospel of Luke? Why take time on several Sunday mornings to walk through this? Hebrews 10:24 exhorts us, "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds." Our Strategic Ministry Plan is a good way of considering how we can spur one another on, because we're not just here to maintain the status quo; we're here to actively pursue our faith together.<sup>1</sup> Last fall, as we were approaching our church's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we began asking ourselves if this might be a good time for us to assess our church's ministry. It wasn't that we thought that we were necessarily doing anything wrong, we just didn't want to assume that we were necessarily doing everything right.

If you think about it, even if our church is only off course by just a few degrees, if we remain off course for a long enough time, it will have a significant cumulative effect. Ministry Drift is inevitable, *unless* we occasionally check our bearings to make sure we're on track. So we decided that it would be wise, and honoring to God, if we took some time to "kick the tires" and "look under the hood" to see if our church needs to make any adjustments. Maybe we just need a little tune-up, or maybe, some things need a complete overhaul!

We set out on this journey with a few primary goals.<sup>2</sup> Our 1<sup>st</sup> goal is...

## **1) Fostering unity within our church around a shared Mission/Vision.**

Psalm 133:1 says, "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!" It's vital that those of us who gather together as the E-Free Church family have a shared ownership, and commitment, to the same things. Certainly, we don't have to agree on every little detail, but we do need to agree on our primary purpose for existing, and how we plan to

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<sup>1</sup> See *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2513 footnote on Hebrews 10:24.

<sup>2</sup> These goals are stated on page one of our Strategic Plan in our chair's, Mark Carlson's, Letter of Introduction.

fulfill that purpose. So this Strategic Ministry Plan puts the work of this team in print, so that all of us can know exactly what we're talking about, and exactly what we're considering committing to as a church. We'll actually be inviting our church to commit to this plan at our congregational meeting at the end of October.

Our 2<sup>nd</sup> goal for developing this Strategic Plan is...

**2) Aligning and prioritizing the use of our physical, financial, personnel, and spiritual resources.**

It's vital that our church is in close alignment, pulling together in the same direction for God's gospel purposes. If we're pulling in different directions, it makes our work together difficult and frustrating. If we're pulling in the same direction, our work can be joyful and unified. So we need to talk this strategy through together, and work toward committing ourselves to a shared list of priorities.

Our 3<sup>rd</sup> goal for developing this Strategic Plan is...

**3) Communicating core aspects of our unique church identity both within our congregation and to those outside it.**

We want to have a clear, shared understanding of what makes our church unique from other churches. Obviously, in many ways we're similar to other churches, but, in certain ways, we're quite unique. We want to clarify and articulate those distinctions so that all of us understand who we are as a church, and who we are not. We also want to communicate those unique attributes to those who are outside of our church walls. We want it to be clear to our community who we are, and what we're all about. And then, it's our prayerful hope that many of them will be drawn to come and join us in following Jesus.

This Strategic Ministry Plan is the result of much prayer, and many hours of frank and honest discussion. The Strategic Leadership Team was composed of a group of deeply devoted followers of Jesus. They all love E-Free Bemidji, and they all have her best interests in mind. This team has been working hard since January; their names include the following:

Mark Carlson – Chair, Brandon Mustful – Lead Facilitator, Amy Graf, Barb Capes, Bill Oakes, Dan Evans, Dan Frost, Deb Brown, Douglas Daube, Eric Nygren, Holly Howes, Jerry Johnson, Karl Salscheider, Kay Sue Eriksson, Ken Wold, Laura Engelstad, and Mandi Buchan.

*(These folks would be glad to sit down and chat with you about any questions you have, over coffee or tea, and pie and ice cream.)*

Our fearless leader was Brandon Mustful, who's not only a member of our church, but also the owner of Mustful Strategic Consulting. Brandon was hired to be the Lead Facilitator of our meetings over these past 8 months. Now that those meetings are completed, he's prepared a written report for

our church; we'll be sharing the first several pages of this report beginning next week. For this morning, we're going to begin with the green and white infographic that was in this week's bulletin (*see the last page of this manuscript*). This infographic gives us a concise snapshot of our church's Mission, Vision, Core Values, and Discipleship Pathway. To be clear, this isn't the full strategic plan, but it is a good overview of some of the key outcomes. There's a lot packed into this one page, so it's pretty tough to take it in, all at once, which is why we're going to spend a few weeks talking about it. Most importantly, we're going to spend time in God's Word, highlighting the Scriptural backing for every point.

The MISSION statement on the upper righthand corner probably sounds familiar to many of us: "Becoming Deeply Devoted Followers of Jesus Together. Our team spent many hours discussing this, and a lot of time in prayer, including many meetings talking it over. And when it came down to it, we agreed that overall it's pretty good, and it fits our church well, which is why we didn't make any changes to it. If you read the fine print in the lefthand corner of your insert, under the word "mission," you'll see that our mission should explain "What we are supposed to be doing as a church." A mission statement is intended to be broad sweeping but brief, which is why we kept it short. In order for us to be united and aligned as a church, we'll need to agree that this is our MISSION: "Becoming Deeply Devoted Followers of Jesus Together."<sup>3</sup>

The rest of our strategy then carries our mission forward by providing us with further details in the following 3 parts, which are all new: Our Vision, Core Values, and Discipleship Pathway. If you read the fine print under our VISION, you'll see that this is "A picture of what the mission will look like when it is realized." So our Vision is this: WE WILL BE A CHURCH WHO

- Glorifies God in all of life.

- Is transformed by God's Word
    - Serves and cares for each other in love
      - Welcomes all people and cares for our neighbors
        - Personally shares the gospel locally and globally
- (Good stuff right!? Could you get behind this vision?)*

This infographic isn't based on our own lofty human ideas, it's based on God's Word; at least, our team believes it is. That's why we're going to spend a few Sundays walking through the Scriptural support that led us to each statement that's listed on this page.

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<sup>3</sup> Learn more here: <https://efcbemidji.org/sermon/what-do-we-mean-by-becoming-deeply-devoted-followers-of-jesus-together/>

Our CORE VALUES are listed on the bottom left corner; they lay the foundation for our Mission, Vision, and Discipleship Pathway. If you read the fine print, you'll see that they're...

"The biblical beliefs that empower and guide our ministries." They include:

- God's glory
  - Biblical Foundation
    - Congregational Worship
      - Caring for the body of believers
      - Connecting with the community
      - Evangelizing the lost

These Core Values aren't our only values, but they are our *core* values. And as we read them over, it's clear that there's a significant overlap between our Core Values and our Vision, but that's to be expected, because everything on this page is closely intertwined. Obviously, it's fairly subjective trying to determine the Core Values of everyone in our church, but our team did our best to represent the entire church, and we prayerfully talked these through. We came to a strong consensus, that these not only represent who we are as a church today, but also who we've been as a church for a long time, even going back to our very beginning. You see, we not only find these Core Values in the Bible, but we also find them in our own hearts. We find them in the very fibers of our being. Our Core Values are just like they sound, they are at our core, at the center of what we believe and practice, and what we hold most dear. As the fine print on the insert makes clear, these Core Values do two important things: *empower* and *guide* our ministries. So make no mistake, our Core Values are crucial to carrying out our Mission, Vision, and Discipleship Pathway.

Our DISCIPLESHIP PATHWAY is on the bottom righthand corner of the insert; it's the 4<sup>th</sup> and final part of our infographic. It contains 4 G's: GATHER, GROW, GIVE, GO. I urge you to say those aloud, "GATHER, GROW, GIVE, GO" These 4 G's summarize our church's strategic plan for discipleship. If you read the fine print, next to the circle with the tree in the middle, you'll see that it says, "A plan to guide disciples toward maturity in Christ." We chose a tree as a symbol of spiritual growth and maturity in Christ. So you might say that there's a 5<sup>th</sup> G imbedded within this pathway: The GOSPEL "G", the Gospel of Jesus Christ! Apart from the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and our focus on becoming His deeply devoted followers, these 4 G's wouldn't be very impressive.<sup>4</sup> But these 4 G's are significant for our church, because of the fact that they're infused with the power and purpose of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, I suppose just about any organization could use these same 4 G's to lay out any number of plans.

In other words...

- > We GATHER *around the gospel*, in the name of Jesus Christ.
- > We GROW *in the gospel*, in spiritual maturity as co-followers of Christ.
- > We GIVE *toward the gospel*, our time/talent/treasure for Jesus' sake,
- > We GO *with the gospel*, taking it out in Jesus' name to make disciples.

So all 4 of these "G's" are Gospel G's. They lay out a 4-part ongoing plan that guides us in our Mission of "Becoming Deeply Devoted Followers of Jesus Together." The final word in our mission statement is "together," which connects powerfully with our first G, GATHER.

We'll look at the other 3 G's in the weeks ahead, but for the rest of today's message, let's zero in on this first "G": GATHER.

Hebrews 10:25 warns us about, "not giving up meeting together...."

The *ESV* translates it, "not neglecting to meet together...."

The *NKJV* says, "not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together...."

This "giving up," "neglecting," and "forsaking" is a fairly strong expression; it has connotations of desertion and abandonment.<sup>5</sup> So we might envision a soldier who abandons their post, and let's down their fellow troops. You see, we're greatly mistaken if we think that our personal faith in Jesus Christ is only our own personal business. Following Jesus isn't just about "me, myself, and I," it's communal. Our Christian faith should be lived out in such a way that God is honored by how it blesses and builds up our fellow believers.

Hebrews 10:25 warns us about "not giving up," and it also compels us to consider the importance of "meeting together." Hebrews 10:25 says, "not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." This is talking about Jesus' 2<sup>nd</sup> coming, the day when He'll come back for us. That day is getting closer and closer, and *that* should compel us "all the more" to "encourage one another." How do we do that? By GATHERING together!

100 years ago, before our church even had a name, way back when we were just a very small group of people meeting together for a S.S. class, what made us a church was that we were gathering in Jesus' name. In the words of our Mission Statement, we were: "Becoming Deeply Devoted Followers of Jesus," AND, we were doing it "TOGETHER." You see, God Himself designed discipleship to be done as a community; following Jesus is something that's done together. Now let's be honest here, we don't always get along. In fact, sometimes we just seem to push each other's buttons, and drive each other nuts! The fact is, it would be much easier to just stay home and watch the livestream, because getting along with other

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<sup>5</sup> See *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 2080 footnote on Hebrews 10:25.

people is hard work. But if we avoid being together, then we'll miss out on the magnificent blessings and the beautiful wisdom of God's plan for the church; you see, this is actually part of God's incredible design for the body of Christ. We bear with one another, and God uses that "bearing with" to build our character:<sup>6</sup>

- > God uses it to challenge us toward self-sacrifice, and to reveal our pride.
- > God uses us to humble one another, and smooth out our rough edges.

Simply gathering together becomes a key means by which God re-forms us, and re-shapes us into the likeness of Christ.

Now, we also encourage one another when one of us is hurting or downhearted, or wrestling with the challenges of life. And, we also exhort one another if one of us is wandering into sin. As we GATHER, we share the load together...

- by serving one another in love,
- by holding each other accountable,
- by preferring one another over ourselves,
- by rejoicing together, and mourning with those who mourn,
- by using our spiritual gifts,
- by giving our financial gifts, and
- by doing the work of gospel TOGETHER.

If we're truly committed to becoming more and more the church that God would have us be, then it begins by faithfully GATHERING.

God's Word consistently prompts God's people with reminders about our need to GATHER. We find this pattern throughout both the Old and New Testaments:

Deuteronomy 31:12 says, "Assemble the people—men, women and children, and the foreigners residing in your towns—so they can listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and follow carefully all the words of this law." The early church is described this way in Acts 2:42-47: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

One of the first requirements for any local church to thrive, and for each person in that church to grow in spiritual maturity, is for everyone to be present, for everyone to show up. In fact, all of the other 3 G's that we'll be

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<sup>6</sup> See Colossians 3:12-17.

looking at (GROW, GIVE, and GO) are severely limited if we fail to GATHER. So it's strategic for us to list it first on our Discipleship Pathway.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>8</sup>

In the New Testament, one of the key illustrations for the local church, is a body. Romans 12:5 says, "so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." The church is made up of many parts, so only together can we make a fully formed body. Even if only one part is absent, the entire body suffers, and we feel the lack of that part. This is why we were so miserable at the start of the Covid Pandemic. Do you remember back in 2020, when we didn't GATHER for onsite worship services for 15 straight weeks!? Our church met almost entirely via livestream, and as nice as livestream can be in a pinch, it's not the same as gathering. Much of who we are as a church, and what we're called to do as a church, absolutely must be done in person. So we need to gather in order for us to function as God would have us function.<sup>9 10</sup>

Today Hebrews 10:25 warned us not to give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing. If you or someone you know has fallen into this habit, then let's correct our course. Another way of saying this, is that we should come to church as often as we possibly can. The primary way that we GATHER is at our Sunday morning worship services. Yes we gather throughout the week at various times and places, but our Sunday morning congregational worship services are our primary gathering point. So let me challenge each and every one of us to make Sunday morning church attendance one of our highest priorities. Of all of the many things that are on your plate, make absolutely sure to leave room for being here on Sunday mornings, as often as you possibly can.

*We need you to be here; and you, need us!*

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<sup>7</sup> The Greek word for church is Ekklesia, which literally means an ASSEMBLY of people, a GATHERING, or a CONGREGATION. Church = ἐκκλησία "① a regularly summoned legislative body, assembly, as generally understood in the Gr-Rom. World... ② a casual gathering of people, an assemblage, gathering... ③ people with shared belief, community, congregation... ④ of OT Israelites assembly, congregation... ⑤ of Christians in a specific place or area (the term ἐκκλ. apparently became popular among Christians in Greek-speaking areas for chiefly two reasons: to affirm continuity with Israel through use of a term found in Greek translations of the Hebrew Scriptures, and to allay any suspicion, especially in political circles, that Christians were a disorderly group)." William Arndt et al., A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 303.

<sup>8</sup> In other words, any church that's trying to determine its Strategic Plan, must first understand that, by its very nature, it's a GATHERING. To put it another way, if we DON'T GATHER, then we're NOT a local church, and there's no point in having a Strategic Ministry Plan.

<sup>9</sup> Even though not all of us are members, it's worth noting that our church constitution lists attendance as a qualification for membership: "who is willing to support the church with faithful attendance." Article IV, MEMBERSHIP, Section 1.

<sup>10</sup> Some of us have jobs that require us to work on Sunday mornings, and some of us are not physically able to get to church, and it's appropriate for us to go on vacation once and a while. But beyond situations like these, the question remains: Is attending church on Sunday mornings high enough on our priority list?

# STRATEGIC PLAN

EVANGELICAL FREE CHURCH OF BEMIDJI



## MISSION

*What we are supposed to be doing as a church.*



## VISION

*A picture of what the mission will look like when it is realized.*

**BECOMING  
DEEPLY DEVOTED  
FOLLOWERS OF  
JESUS TOGETHER.**

## WE WILL BE A CHURCH WHO

- GLORIFIES GOD IN ALL OF LIFE
- IS TRANSFORMED BY GOD'S WORD
- SERVES AND CARES FOR EACH OTHER IN LOVE
- WELCOMES ALL PEOPLE AND CARES FOR OUR NEIGHBORS
- PERSONALLY SHARES THE GOSPEL LOCALLY AND GLOBALLY

## DISCIPLESHIP PATHWAY



*A plan to guide disciples toward maturity in Christ.*



## CORE VALUES

*The biblical beliefs that empower and guide our ministries.*

**GOD'S GLORY**  
**BIBLICAL FOUNDATION**  
**CONGREGATIONAL WORSHIP**  
**CARING FOR THE BODY OF BELIEVERS**  
**CONNECTING WITH THE COMMUNITY**  
**EVANGELIZING THE LOST**

