
VISION FORWARD



A KINGDOM ECOSYSTEM

“What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.” (Luke 13:18-19)

I thought of this verse recently while watching Planet Earth II, Jungles. There was one particular tree that over 300 years had grown from seed to giant. But more remarkable was its success had given life to others. Its branches carried over 1000 particular kinds of plants—ferns, herbs, and orchids living and growing only on this tree. This single tree sustained its own ecosystem, a community of interacting organisms and their own environment.

The kingdom of God, Jesus says, is like a mustard seed, small, inconspicuous, easily overlooked, difficult to imagine by looking at it what it might become. In fact, though, it becomes a large tree,

6-8 feet (or more) in height. It not only produces life after its own kind, but by its “success” it impacts and sustains the lives of others as well.

The kingdom of God did not come as anyone expected or predicted. It came in the form of a baby, a suffering servant, a crucified savior. But from this small beginning on earth grew something that would spread across the globe, that would transform the world, every life, and everything that has breath. Here was the kingdom of God coming from eternity into time, from heaven to earth. The old was passing away, behold, the new has come.

In Jesus Christ and his salvation, the kingdom of God and of heaven is at hand. Jesus is the Resurrected King who has conquered sin and death, is working all things together for the good of his people, is bringing all things together under his rule, and is uniting all things together in himself. He is and will be “all in all”.

Because of him, there is a new life, forgiveness and freedom from sin; a new heart and way of living; a new humanity, sustained by and thriving in God. This kingdom, and the life belonging to it, comes from, through, and for God. And its life is growing and spreading, impacting and transforming hearts and lives and communities everywhere. Including Oswego, New York. Do you believe this?

Think of all the people that are part of Elim Grace currently... You probably can't think of all of them! There are more people now than you can know or name at once. But each represents a story, a new life in the kingdom that manifests and spreads the life, glory, and love of God's saving work in Jesus Christ. None of their lives, and none of ours, would (nor could) have come into a new existence apart from the Savior Creator. The “success” of his crucifixion and resurrection has given us life. We are born again! In him we live and move and have our being.

Jesus is the Vine and we are the branches, abiding, growing, and bearing fruit in him (John 15). We are, we might imagine, a thousand lives growing on single branch, or, thousands upon thousands, “a great multitude that no one could count,” (Revelation 7:9; 19:1) growing from a single tree. *We are a community of new creations within the new environment of God's resurrection life and power on the earth.*

It is a glorious thing to be saved and be part of God's kingdom. To serve our Lord Jesus and to participate by the Holy Spirit in his speaking and working in our city is a joy that strengthens every task. Wherever you go, your growth is rooted and sustained in Christ. Whatever you do, the fruit of the good works which God has prepared for you to do is part of the ecosystem that thrives in Christ and, through you, impacts the lives around you.

“Christ in me” extends beyond and reaches out into our homes, workplaces, streets—connecting and giving and bringing his abundant life to our city's needs. All of this is gospel proclamation, the good news declaration and manifestation that Jesus Christ is King and Lord of heaven and earth. Because death could not hold him, the gospel cannot be contained, it's power cannot be defeated, and God's kingdom cannot be reversed.

Bethel Recovery Center

What will the Bethel Recovery House be like? It will be a “home” for the broken and lost drug addict.

“The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.” (Proverbs 16:9) The “plan,” then, is for us to serve those who have lost everything because of drugs (or are willing to give up everything because of their drug addiction) and to see them recover their life, to see their life restored. These lives would come to Bethel and voluntarily commit to staying with us 12-18 months towards the goal of becoming fully restored, trustworthy, and productive citizens in their community.

Why 12 months? Because it takes at least 12 months for an addict’s brain to heal from “trauma” and begin to think differently than before. Up until this point there is much that is required of them to thrive in daily life that they simply are unable to do or to think. These critical months will be a patient walk alongside them through the ups and downs of their daily (re)learning of new habits, skills, and values.

There is of course much more that will go into beginning and running the Bethel Recovery House. We will want to create profitable, self-sustaining businesses to help employ and fund those in recovery. There will need to be volunteers and staff to both help manage the “home” and train and mentor those living there. Because learning to live in community will be essential to anyone’s success at Bethel House.

There will be morning devotionals and weekend church services; weekend and perhaps weeknight opportunities to learn and cultivate new job skills (carpentry, etc.), creative skills (painting, etc.), and life skills (budgeting, etc.). The list of details, quite honestly, is long, and much more could be said.

So we must pause, and remember to lift our eyes to God for the help and wisdom we’ll need. Bethel means “the house of God”. We won’t first look at all the hard work and sacrifice that will be required of us. We must certainly count the cost! But we will look first to those who need rescuing and to the One who came down from heaven to rescue them, like us, the lost, the broken, the sick.

In him we lack nothing—we’ll have enough—of what we’ll need to accomplish everything he calls us to. He will establish our steps. So let us dream big, plan wisely, work hard, love patiently, and pray continually.

There will be a meeting on **March 3rd, 9-10am**, for all those burdened to support Bethel in some way, or stirred to start businesses (or get on board with their existing business), or feel called to be involved in the home directly, or are simply curious to know more about it.

The 200 Barrier

I mentioned a few Sundays ago that we had broken the 200 barrier. This barrier represents one of the most difficult to break in terms of church growth. The reason is that a church up to this point has been viewed largely as the “pastor’s church” or belonging to the pastor and a few key leaders. But at this point there must be a mentality shift in the mind of both the leadership and the people, *if* the church is going to be growing and healthy.

I believe we are a healthy and growing church. However, we must not take this growth for granted or lightly. If God is drawing new people to Elim Grace, if God, as Paul says, “gives the growth” (1 Corinthians 3:7), then we must be prepared to receive the growth he gives. The goal of growth is bearing fruit, or reproducing, or multiplying. So if we are to continue being both faithful and fruitful, two shifts need to occur in us as a church.

A first shift that must occur in churches that reach the 200 barrier is that the church must become “our” church, not “your” or “their” church. People must begin to take ownership. It’s no longer about consuming or being entertained; it’s about partnering.

A second shift that must take place is that people must become intentional about creating and being in fellowship with one another.

Proximity does not equal community. At 35 in attendance friendship is natural. At 75 friendship is normal. At 125 friendship is extended. But at 200 friendships are created.



Why? Because at 200 we have reached what is called “the anonymity barrier,” where people can show up at church and be anonymous. So community needs to be built. It must be intentional. Each of us must intentionally be moving from proximity to community. Sometimes we can break down the barriers between us by opening the doors between us: a

door of saying hello, or of having a conversation, or of joining and/or inviting someone to a small group, or of eating dinner together with a new family, or of inviting a friend to church.

Ed Stetzer says, “People will stay not because you are friendly church, but because they made friends.” We are without question a friendly church. But we must also continue to be a church that

creates and cultivates friendships. Fellowship, not attendance, is the health of our church. So let us together pursue the health of Elim Grace as a whole through intentional fellowship and friendship with one another.

OUR BUILDING

There have recently been some changes to our building that many have noticed, and there have been some changes that few have noticed. Over the next year there will most likely be both obvious and subtle changes occurring. We must remember: *The mission is not our building, but the building is a key component to our mission.*

Change is inevitable, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't steward or direct that change. Our building is a resource to serve our city. As a resource, we want to use it in such a way that it helps, not hinders, our vision: connecting people to God, one another, the city, and culture.

PRACTICE RESURRECTION

Easter Sunday 2018 will mark the beginning of something we'll call "*Resurrection Week*". During that week all of us will be encouraged—in the light of the resurrection of Jesus and the new life we have in him—to do something *new*.

Maybe you'll begin a new hobby and try a painting class. Maybe you'll sign-up to take a Foster Training Class. Maybe your small group will find someone's home and do some repairs on it. Maybe you'll decide to get baptized. Maybe your family will invite a new family over for dinner. Maybe there's a family in need and you'll provide dinner for them every night for one week. Maybe you'll finally write that email or send that text. Maybe....There are countless possibilities! So start praying, imagining, talking, planning today.

Growing up in Christ is growing up into Christ. Maturity is Christ being formed in you, living in you. This is the power of a resurrection life: the same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead now lives in you. And the life we now live is the life of the kingdom of God, the new life belonging to the new heaven and earth to come, breaking into the world and into our lives through Jesus who died and rose again. In other words, as Eugene Peterson puts it, we are to "practice resurrection".

We hope you will tell us your stories from that week, so that in turn we can share them with others and celebrate together the God who makes all things new.

TRAINING IN GODLINESS (by Alissa Evans)

I've been working out at the CrossFit gym around the corner from my house for a few months. Not having experience, I started out in an Intro Class where I learned the basics, the foundations needed to progress into more complex lifts and movements. Now, I am out of those Intro Classes and in a

class full with people conditioned like elite athletes, beginners like myself, and everything in between.

Being in these classes pushes me, because I can see what is possible with training. A few weeks ago I had the chance to go back to an Intro Class with a friend and I was able to see and feel the progress I had made over the past couple of months. Overtime what was once uncomfortable or unnatural was becoming more natural and more comfortable. I understood better what I was doing and how to do it. I was no longer outside my comfort zone, and I was becoming stronger. But would I have grown if I stayed in that Intro Class? Possibly, but certainly not to the point I have grown being paired up with avid lifters. By working side by side with those stronger than me, I am learning what is possible; I am stretched and challenged; I am given inspiration or a goal to work towards.

Apply this to life in both the practical and the spiritual. What happens when we surround ourselves with people in the exact same spot as us is we survive. We compare notes, we enjoy the company of a fellow human being in the same place as us. It's comfortable, it's easy, it's natural. We cheer each other on for staying afloat, but we don't call each other up to a new level. What we need is to also find those who are stronger than us, those operating in life and in faith at a level higher than our own.

When we surround ourselves with those that are "better" than us at something, we learn, we stretch, we grow, and we see a possibility we couldn't have imagined before. In contrast, if we have become experienced at something, but only ever surround ourselves with "beginners," we risk becoming stagnant ourselves, developing blind spots and nurturing our weaknesses rather than challenging them.

As a growing and maturing spiritual people we need to be reaching *up* towards those that are "stronger" than us, reaching *out* to those in the same place as we are, and reaching *down* to those in a place of need. We need to encourage those that are beginners, cheer them on, encourage them, build them up, and teach and model for them a godly, healthy life. We also need to link arms with those in the same spot as us, reminding them to stay the course, helping them get up should they fall, and encouraging them along the way. And, finally, we need to find those who have more experience than us or are in a place that we would aspire to reach. We should seek to learn from them, talk with them, and be vulnerable with them.

"Train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come." (1 Timothy 4:7-8)

