

## The last year or so at PCF

Stephen Witmer • November 9, 2009

We've seen numerous changes in the last year or so at PCF and my purpose here is to give you, from my perspective, a flavor for what is happening. I'm going to highlight some of the good things God is doing. That is certainly not to ignore the challenges we have faced and are facing:

- in the last year, we lost some dearly loved people – Chris Crooker died in September 2008, Ruth Grosvenor died in March 2009, and several PCF families have lost loved ones
- Some folks are still healing spiritually and emotionally from the difficult last several years in our church
- Many individuals are struggling with sin and sickness and suffering – that is the normal Christian life and will continue until Jesus returns

God is producing good fruit even through (*especially* through) the suffering in our midst.

But in this update, I want to focus on some of the very positive things God is doing among us. My Biblical warrant for doing this is Psalm 77.11-12: 'I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds.'

Some of the very visible changes in the last year have been:

- the significant face-lift to the front of the old building; this gives us a much more attractive, welcoming presence in the community – we're hoping to get a new front sign in place before the ground freezes
- we've seen an increase of about \$20,000 in income in 2009 over 2008 (of course, expenses have also gone up)
- an increase in attendance and participation:
  - o an increase of about 30-40 people/week on Sunday mornings – that's an increase of about 30% in the course of a year
    - We've also added to our numbers via *biological* church growth – a number of babies have been born or will soon be born!
  - o we see an increasing number of people involved in a small group of some kind at PCF (men's ministry is holding steady; Heart to Heart attendance is up by about 50% this year; youth group attendance is up by about 50% this year; Life Groups are up considerably although I don't have exact numbers)
  - o more people are serving in various ways within the church – we're seeing people who have been on the periphery getting more involved

There are also many other less visible – and more important – things that have happened in the last year.

I think it's fair to say there is a sense of 'optimism' among many PCF folks and a sense that as a church we're moving in some good directions.

We now have four core values (God. Community. Witness. Word.) and a clearly defined church mission: *'We exist to be a Jesus-centered community in Pepperell, speaking gospel words and doing gospel works to display the worth of God to the world.'*

I'll summarize some of what has happened in the last year at PCF under the headings of our church mission.

## We exist to be a Jesus-centered community in Pepperell...

- **What does it mean to read the Bible in community?** We're finding out. 2009 has been 'The Year of the Word' at PCF. Many people have been reading through the Bible together throughout this year. It has been an exciting journey and I'm very pleased with the number of people who have hung in there with the reading and those who have joined along the way. One of the best fruits of this has been the many conversations PCF people have had with each other about what they are reading in God's Word.
- **The growth of Life Groups.** In the last year or so, our Life Groups have done a series on battling unbelief by John Piper, a study on the prayers of Paul by D.A. Carson, and are now studying James. We have solid attendance, good community forming, and are regularly investing in our Life Group leaders with prayer and training. We've seen some of the Life Groups growing to the point where they will Lord-willing be able to multiply in the next 6 months.
- **Seeing the youth as part of our Jesus-centered community.** The youth group is experiencing more consistent involvement among the kids who are coming and is seeing more genuine hunger among the kids. The youth group staff team is slowly increasing in size and connecting well with the kids. Over the summer, 33 kids and 5 staff went to summer camp at Monadnock.
- **A God-centered Sunday School curriculum.** We've moved to a Sunday School curriculum that emphasizes God as the main character of the Bible and teaches kids about God's character. We are avoiding moralistic, man-centered curricula.
- **More one-another ministry on Sunday mornings.** We're introducing more regular times of sharing on Sunday mornings so people can hear how God is working in the lives of other PCF members to help us live out our mission. We also have coffee after the service every week and have seen more people staying to hang out and talk. People are staying for a long time after the services to chat and connect! We also enjoy great one-another times on the first Saturday evening of each month as we eat together at a potluck dinner and then worship Jesus.
- **Building connections with other local Jesus-centered communities.** I attend a monthly lunch and prayer time with local pastors. In May, we coordinated a prayer time with other churches and pastors for the National Day of Prayer. This summer we had a softball game with Grace Baptist Church (we got creamed, but had a good time!)
- **Investing in our ministry leaders.** We had our first annual PCF Leaders' Evening this year. Tim Chester spoke to us about gospel, community, and

mission. My sense was that the 40-50 PCF ministry leaders who were there received this as a gift, a thank-you, and an investment in them.

- **Building marriages.** On November 14, at least sixteen PCF couples will attend a one-day marriage seminar together. We're seeking to build marriages in community.

...speaking gospel words and doing gospel works...

- **Understanding the gospel.** We've thought together as a church about what the 'gospel' is – in September, I preached a three-part sermon series called 'What is the Gospel?'
- **An increasing outward focus among our people.** I've seen an increasing outward focus among PCF folks as we seek to bring life to our towns and neighborhoods. Life Groups have tried a bunch of things – raking leaves for those who need help (see the current edition of the PCF newsletter!), having cookouts this summer and inviting Christians and non-Christians in order to build relationships, serving in soup kitchens, helping with special PCF guest services where we expect many non-Christians in attendance, packing boxes for Thanksgiving at PACH (Pepperell Aid from Community to Home). I know of a PCF member who recently organized a coat drive for a local homeless shelter. Another person is now volunteering with PACH. We heard from Bob Bancroft recently about an opportunity he had to pray over a friend's new firepit! We heard recently from Cheryl Knittel about how she's reading the Bible with another soccer mom who's not a Christian. Nine-year-old Jacob Dow is raising money to stop the trafficking of children.
- **Heart to Heart.** Our women's ministry continues to be a dynamic example of speaking gospel words. There are now two small groups (up from one group last year) for new Christians and non-Christians who want to investigate Christianity. Women in Pepperell and surrounding areas are hearing the gospel and responding with interest.
- **Special guest services.** We had many visitors for our Christmas Eve service, Christmas Sunday service, and Easter Sunday service and we used these services as opportunities to speak the gospel clearly and (hopefully) winsomely, particularly by having PCF folks give personal testimonies.
- **VBS this summer.** We had fewer kids than usual, but a large percentage of the kids were from unchurched families and they heard the gospel! It was very exciting to see this many non-Christian kids. Many non-Christian parents also attended the final evening and heard the gospel.

...to display the worth of God to the world.

- **Displaying God's worth through baptism.** This summer we had a major baptism service in which we baptized 18 people in Jim and Cheryl Knittel's pool. This was a powerful time for our church family. Many non-Christian family and friends attended and there were great times of connecting with these folks during the cookout after the baptism.
- **Missions.** Dale Gamble has become our new missions committee chairman. Kevin Coffey gave us an update on My Father's House in August and George

Renner (our missionary in Kenya) preached in October. We're currently adding to the number of missionaries we support as a church. The size of the missions budget has increased as our overall budget has grown.

- **Countless stories.** As your pastor I get to hear a lot of stories of how God is giving many of you opportunities and gifting you with the desire to speak gospel words and do gospel works in order to display his worth to the world. It is one of the most exciting parts of my job. I've seen a group of PCF folks take a few hours of their Saturday to help a complete stranger move to a new house. I've heard stories of you speaking gospel words to your dentist, your co-workers, your neighbors, and your families.

## Looking forward...a PCF culture

- When Tim Chester was here recently speaking to our PCF leaders, he said something I've been thinking a lot about. He said his church-planting movement in the north of England doesn't have a building, a staff, or much of a budget, but what they do have is a *culture*. In other words, the people who are part of their church-planting movement *actually embrace and live out their values*. Their lives are shaped by the culture they've created.
- As we move forward, here are a few ways I'd like to see us grow in developing a PCF culture:
  - o **Conversion growth.** In the last year and a half, I know of at least three professions of faith. Most of our numerical growth has been as a result of people coming to PCF who weren't attending church regularly before or who weren't attending a Bible-teaching church, so that is *good* growth. But my desire is for us to see more conversion growth. Conversion growth is growth that occurs because people are coming to Jesus, not because they're simply swapping churches. I believe we will see more conversion growth as we grow in speaking gospel words and doing gospel works.
  - o **Missional community.** This is a term Tim Chester introduced to our PCF leaders in October. It means that our small groups (men's group, women's group, youth group, Life Groups) are on mission together, in community. I'd like to see us doing life together outside of our regular meetings – having meals, watching T.V., hanging out so that we're a regular part of each other's lives. And then inviting our non-Christian friends to join us. This is 'layering.' Being ourselves and talking about the gospel as we have opportunity. That is missional community: ordinary life with gospel intentionality. I heard of two PCF women who went to a party recently – they spoke with a woman there who is not attending a Bible-teaching church. They hit it off well and she emailed soon after, asking whether there are any groups at PCF she could check out. That is missional community.
  - o **'Spreading is worth the sacrifice.'** I want us increasingly as a church to be willing to count the cost of being outward-looking and spreading, and gladly embrace whatever sacrifice is necessary in order to spread. For example, it will hopefully soon be time to multiply a couple of our

Life Groups. That will be a big sacrifice because we'll need to stop meeting as regularly with people we've come to know and love. Are we willing to make that sacrifice so that there will be *two* Christian groups in local neighborhoods rather than one? Are we willing to sacrifice in order to spread?

- **Covenant membership.** I would like to see us as a church embrace covenant membership – say to each other that we're willing to enter into covenant together to be a Jesus-centered community in Pepperell. I don't think covenant membership will make things at PCF neat and tidy. In fact, I'm kind of hoping it will create a good kind of 'messiness,' as we get more deeply into each other's lives and become more real with each other. I believe the increased commitment of covenant membership will be good for us as a church. It will promote a culture that embraces this way of thinking and being: 'It's okay to not be okay, but it's not okay to stay there.'
- **A passion for the gospel.** I want us as a church to be seeing with increasing clarity the connection between the gospel and our everyday lives. I want us to be more *passionate* about studying God's Word, because we realize it matters for our lives. I want us to live *from* the gospel (to pursue all we do as forgiven sinners and children of God) and *for* the gospel (in order to further the spread of the good news). My main labor as your pastor is praying for you and preaching God's Word to you. And my aim is to be cultivating a passion for the gospel in my own life and handling God's Word on Sundays and throughout the week with a reverence and passion that will be attractive and compelling to others. I want people who get to know us to recognize right away that we *know* the gospel and we *love* the gospel and we *live* the gospel.