

A Church That Runs Members Off
November 9, 2008
Acts 13:1-4

Do you know it was 1997 when I first preached a sermon entitled “Running Members Off?” For over ten years we’ve been using the phrase, “running members off,” talking about that person who comes into our church, and comes to know Christ. They are trained, they are discipled, they discover who they are in Christ, and then they leave to go do a significant ministry somewhere in the kingdom of God. Sometimes it’s international. We have missionaries in Germany, South Africa, other parts of Europe, throughout the United States and locally. No, I’m not going to name any of them, because I’ll forget one and then I’ll get an e-mail about the one I forgot. Suffice it to say that one of the new challenges before us as a church is that we’re having to rethink the mission offering and the mission budget, because we are now supporting missionaries. We are now as a church a “missions sending” organization, which is kind of a different model for us. But we are rethinking some of the things our members are called to do in the places they need to be sent to.

As a church we celebrate how we have grown. We celebrate the good things God is doing in and through Brentwood Baptist Church. We celebrate that there are a lot of people who for a lot of reasons find Brentwood Baptist Church to be their home church. But we really get excited when these very same members begin to understand that they are called from. There is a reason God put Brentwood Baptist Church near an exit ramp. It is so that every time you leave this campus you are reminded that you are supposed to leave from here. This is not a destination. It is a base—a base where you are trained, and a base from which you are deployed. Now where would I get such a crazy idea? Acts 13: 1-4. Stand with me in honor of God's Word.

¹ In the local church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius the Cyrenian, Manaen, a close friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² As they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work that I have called them to." ³ Then, after they had fasted, prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them off. ⁴ Being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they came down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. This is God's Word for God's people. Hear it, believe it and live. Let's pray together. We know You still call people. We know there is still work to do, so we pray as You call us to our work

that we will be just as quick as Barnabas and Paul were. And we pray this in Your name, Amen.

Can you imagine being in that church service? Can you imagine they were in the middle of worship, ministering to the Lord? They were singing praises to God, they were praying together. It was all about this vertical connection that worship is supposed to be about. As they were in the middle of this worship one of the men, who was not named, stood up and said, “This is what God is saying to us. We need to set aside Barnabas, the “Son of Encouragement,” the one who builds us up. We also need to set aside Paul, one of our best teachers and theologians, for the missionary work that they have been called to do. In verse 3 the church affirms that this is indeed the way the Spirit is leading. In verse 4 they’re gone. Now I figure at the next worship service either everybody’s there because there’s a lot going on, and it is exciting to see what is going to happen next. Or nobody is there, being afraid they may be the one that the prophet names this time. But any one of them who would come, or any one who was there should not be surprised that the Spirit would name them to go to a particular place. We are called, not only to a relationship with Jesus Christ, but to join Christ in the work of redeeming and reclaiming some part of our broken creation back into a right relationship with

Him. You come, you're trained. You come, you learn. You come, you're affirmed and encouraged. You leave.

One of the mistakes we have made in the modern church is that we have told you that church is a destination. Church is a place. You get up on Sunday morning and you "go to church." You drive by here on Concord Road, and you point out to somebody, "there's my church." No, there's the building, but not the church. The church is made up of the people, not the bricks. It's all the believers who gather together—not the sheetrock. And if something happens, God forbid, and a storm damaged this building, it would not damage the church. It would damage the building. The fact of the matter is, we are the church wherever we are, on whatever day it may be. We're just not a being that is constituted for a few hours on Sunday. We are the church wherever we are. That means there is church in your office. There is church in your school. There is church in your neighborhood, because God has sent you there. He has placed you there, so that you would be one of the connecting points of a lost world.

There's a reason that hospitals have an ambulance service. Sometimes sick people can't get to a hospital. You don't see doctors saying, "Well, just as soon as the sick people show up we'll get started." No, you send an ambulance after them. In

the same way God has put you in some places that you would tell me are very, very dark. They are places where it is very difficult for you to live as a believer. That's probably why Jesus sent you there. Now remember, no matter how dark the darkness, no matter how black or heavy you may think it is, darkness can never put out the light. The darker it is the brighter the little candle seems to shine. If it is dark where you are, it is a failure of the light, not the power of the dark. I'll remind you what I tell you often: If you walk into a room and turn on the light switch and the bulb blows, what do you say? You say, "The bulb blew out." You do not say, "The darkness killed another one." It's a failure of the light, not the power of the dark. You're sent where you are: your office, your neighborhood, your school—to bring the light to that dark place so it doesn't continue to be so dark.

This is a place where we come. We worship. Remember, worship is best when we celebrate what God has done. From that we celebrate what God will yet do. We anticipate what He will do. We celebrate the stories of Paul and Barnabas. Those stories are to be stories that you celebrate—stories you know that happen again and again in your life. From that we anticipate what God will continue to do in your life and in my life. But we measure success and we measure Christianity by attendance. Do you get there? Do you show up? Are you present? We check

your name and we miscommunicate to you that you have completed your responsibilities as a believer. This is not where you stay.

What would you do if you were to get on the interstate this afternoon and take out across the country, and you came to a sign that said, “Rest Stop—5 Miles.” You and the family decide to pull over and you get out and stretch your legs. While you are there you strike up a conversation with a man and a woman. Strangely enough, you strike up an entire conversation with their family. In this conversation you find out that this family—just like you—had been travelling, but they quit travelling, and they decided to live at the Rest Stop. Now, if you were talking to them they would say, “It’s a great place to live. They keep the grass cut. They keep the vending machines full. You get to meet all kinds of people who pull in. It’s a nice place to live.” You then got back in your car, shut the door and put it in “Drive” in a hurry. You would not turn to your wife or turn to your husband, and say, “You know, those people are on to something. Maybe we need to find us a nice Rest Stop.” That’s not what you would say. You would say, “What in the world is wrong with those people?” That’s not a destination. That’s a Rest Stop.” In the same way, this is a Rest Stop—a place for you to catch your breath; a place for you to be retooled and retrained; and a place for you to be sent from.

As you know, we've been talking about running members off for a long time. We're excited now that we are coming to an actual strategy about how we are going to run some of our members off. You've heard us talk about the South Campus, and a Regional Campus Model. We are getting ready to talk about that again tonight at a Town Hall Meeting in the Inman Deaf Chapel, right after the evening worship. We'll be voting on it over the next two weeks. One of the people that we are running off is a part of this process—our own Jay Strother. Jay, as a member of our staff, will continue to be a member of our staff as he leads the South Campus. I want to ask Jay to join me up here for a few minutes as we talk about how God has been working in his life and his family's life to confirm this is the way God is leading. You do know that Brentwood Baptist Church is a church start? Woodmont Baptist Church started us. We have since started Clearview Baptist. Bill Wilson, the Founding Pastor of this church, was insistent that we be a church that started other churches. We are delighted that Bill's vision is coming to fruition.

Jay has been leading the team that has been looking at the South Campus and what the Regional Church Model would look like. So we thought it would be important today for you to hear his own testimony and witness, not only about the need for the South Campus, but how God has confirmed in his life and his family's life that

it is the place he needs to be. Now Jay, you've been on staff for several years, but your introduction to the South Campus and its ministry started with a little frustration on your part, didn't it?

(Jay): Yes, it's interesting how God doesn't do anything by accident. When my wife and I moved to this area to serve this church in 2001, we couldn't find a house that we could afford near the church. Our realtor said, "There's a little community out in Thompson's Station/Spring Hill, where they are just starting to build a few houses. Let's drive out there." So we did, and we purchased a home there. It was the best option for us at the time with our growing family. It is a little tough to be 20 miles away from the place that I serve, but we just decided we would try to make the best of it. What is interesting is that in 2001, when we moved out there, Spring Hill had 7,000 folks there. I thought, "This is nice. It's about the size of the town where I grew up in Illinois. I'm a small town boy. I like the quiet life out here in this nice little suburb." Well, it turns out that 20,000 of our friends caught wind of the same idea, and came out there to join us. It led to traffic jams trying to get up I-65 in the mornings. It's led to a lot of different challenges for us, but probably one of the most unique—the one that tugs at our heart—is that God began to do something for Tanya and me as we began to talk with our neighbors and

build relationships with them. We wanted them to be part of this biblical community.

We love this church, and we wanted to invite people to be a part of it. But there were always a couple of barriers that kept coming up. The first one was, “It’s just so far.” Those people who commuted during the week didn’t want to commute on Sundays. Even if they could come visit us on Sunday mornings, their kids and busy lifestyles made it tough for them to get back and forth. The second thing was the social barrier. That’s a different community than this. “Would I be accepted there?” For people who aren’t churched, this is a big place with a big steeple, and it’s scary for people who have never been part of any church before. The North American Mission Board did a study a couple of years ago in Spring Hill, and discovered that only 17% of the residents out there say that they either attend church or are even looking for a church.

(Mike): Okay, say that again, slowly.

(Jay): 17% of people—so 83% of the people who live in that community—don’t even have church on their radar. So it articulated our conviction that if we don’t go to them, they are not going to come looking for us here on Concord Road.

(Mike): There was also something happening in Tanya’s life, right? She had the small group Bible study going on.

(Jay): She did. There were a number of ladies in our community—some of them married and some of them single—and they just needed an opportunity to connect. So my wife started networking and building relationships with them, and she started a ladies Bible study. Sometimes it met in our home, and in other homes, but of all the ladies who were in and out of that Bible study over the years, most of them were not churched. Most of them had all kinds of challenges in their lives, and most of them could not find a good church to be a part of. As a matter of fact, when the church asked me to take on this role and lead this development team, at about the same time, one of the things that God did in my life was through Amy-Jo, our Girl's Minister. She shared a devotion with us that is based on this painting that we are going to put up on the screen for you. This really touched my heart and spoke to me in a pretty powerful way.

This painting was done by a young man who decided he wanted to follow in his father's footsteps and become a pastor. But he couldn't pass the theological entrance exam to get into seminary. So he decided he'd try his hand at mission work instead. He went to work with poor men in the Belgium coal mines, only to give away everything he made the first three months, because he felt so sorry for the miners in their plight. So the local pastor pulled him off the mission field, and said he was ill-equipped for ministry. Then this man decided to pursue his other

passion, and that was art. It was painting. We know a lot about his spiritual journey because we have literally thousands of letters that he wrote to his brother. Over the years those letters reflect the fact that he became more and more distant from the church. And he felt that God was more and more distant from him. So near the end of his life he decided to paint a church and this is the painting he created. It's called "The Church at Auvers," and Vincent Van Gogh chose to paint this church without any doors. If you'll notice the perspective of the church, there is no way into this church. There's a path that leads around the church, but does not lead to it. The skies above the church are dark and foreboding. There is no light that comes from within.

So I began to realize for our church, one of the missions that God had put before us was, how do we simply create more doors—more connecting points so people can be a part of what God is doing in and through Brentwood Baptist Church? As we began to think and pray about this we realized that in essence, the idea of multiple campuses gives you the opportunity to create more doors, and more opportunities for people who are not looking at church to find it to be a place to be connected to.

(Mike): Now we looked at a lot of different models. We went to a lot of different places and talked to a lot of different people. Tell us about how we decided on the Regional Campus and the South Campus strategy.

(Jay): A lot of churches have gone about the multi-site thing in a variety of ways. Every church has to find its own way that is consistent with its identity and its DNA. One of the fascinating things we discovered in our research is that two out of three new church starts in America don't make it. It is simply overwhelming for one guy or just a handful of people to try to go out there and make it on their own. So about 20 or 30 years ago some churches in the U. S. began experimenting with this idea of a multi-site concept. The idea was that, just like a community college, there could be a main campus and then there would be other campuses in which there was the same quality of teaching and the same degree program, but it was more accessible to people in those communities.

Churches have gone about that in a variety of ways. Our team has been on part of a two-year journey working with consultants and working with church members, sitting down over coffee and lunch. Many of you have been a part of these conversations at some time or another, as this church has literally helped shape the direction that we feel God is calling us to go. We landed on what we call the Regional Campus Model, where in essence the Concord Road Campus becomes

the base, and we “send out” from this place. We looked at communities throughout our region which are in need of more balanced and healthy churches that worship, that discipleship and serve. We looked at how that would take place, and how we would live that out on a week to week basis. We would have the opportunity on the weekends to create worship services that are very similar to what takes place here, most likely on a smaller scale. There would be live worship and live preaching most of the time, because our church feels that is what best meets the need.

(Mike): You and I will be teaching the same text and basically the same sermon.

(Jay): That’s the idea. No matter how many campuses we have, that will be the one thing that unifies us. We are in the same series, and we are on the same text.

One of the things that we see as a great opportunity for Mike and our church is the fact that as we have multiple campuses someday, Mike will sit down on Monday afternoons with all of us and share his thoughts and his sermon notes. An entire slew of young pastors will have the opportunity to go back to their communities and preach the Word, contextualizing it to the congregation that they lead. So we have become really excited about this. We will do discipleship connecting groups just like we do here—and be intentional with preschool and children and youth, focused on making parents and families the primary influence in their lives.

(Mike): It is a plan that we now have of taking a child, with the parent as the discipler, on up through 12th grade. By the way, this model is now being studied by several seminaries. We are sharing with them how we are working with families. We will be able to take that model down to the South Campus. We'll be able to take the Deacon Ministry there, as well as the Nurture Team, and Small Groups. Yet we would leave Communications, the Business Office and Administration here—which bog down a new church plant.

(Jay): Why re-invent the wheel when this church has spent almost 40 years figuring out philosophy of ministry, figuring out operating systems? It is one of the opportunities that a multi-site has to be healthier from the very beginning, because you are not weighed down with figuring out everything from scratch all over again.

(Mike): What does this remind you of? For those of you who have been here, what does this sound like? Doesn't this remind you of the start of Brentwood Baptist Church? In fact, Jay, you had several of our founding members come and talk to you, right?

(Jay): Yes, absolutely. It's been unique the way that God places people in your path at the right time. The month that the trustees asked me to lead this development team one of our dear members—a man by the name of Joe Brantley—found his way into my office on a cold Sunday morning. It was about

7:45 a.m. when he plopped down in my chair and said, “The Holy Spirit told me I needed to tell you a story.” I perked up and said, “I am all ears.” He went on to recount the story that many of you have heard before—about how a group of people from Woodmont Baptist in Nashville would move to this community. Brentwood was a growing community and full of young families, and they felt convicted that they needed to start a church to reach these folks. So several of these families got together with some church experts downtown, who said, “Why don’t you come meet with us and we’ll give you our input?” So they went and met with them and shared their vision:

#1 We want to plant a church in Brentwood.

#2 We want to build a multi-purpose building first so we can use it for a variety of purposes to reach folks.

The church experts looked at them and said, “Ah, I don’t know about that. Brentwood will never be big enough to support a church.” This is a true story. And they also said, “Everybody knows you build a worship center first. You don’t build a multi-purpose building.” So, Joe and the rest of those members politely thanked the folks they were with, got up and walked out of the room. They felt that God had put this on their hearts, just like the Antioch church in Acts 13. They didn’t have all the answers. They just knew this is what they were called to do. So they went and put their own resources (some of them) up as collateral to be able to

buy the first piece of property on Franklin Road. And Joe shared with me, that they could not imagine at the time what God would do and how He would bless. So we've got this DNA as a church of people who are willing to take risks to reach a new and growing community for Christ. That's something we are excited to reignite and be a part of.

(Mike): One of the things you don't get to see about Jay that we do is his insight, and how he has grown as a leader, or what he does as staff in our meetings, or his commitment to the Lord and how he has grown in his faith. You come up to me often when he preaches, and you tell me I can be off anytime I want to, just as long as he preaches. . . Then you tell me, "We're going to lose him if we don't do something." Somebody's going to find out about him. Churches already have. But he and his family feel they are committed to lead the South Campus of Brentwood Baptist Church. How many of you believe (just raise your hand) that Jay Strother is ready to pastor a church? Thank you. Me too.

I would like to now recognize Dennis Morgan, one of our trustees, who will read this motion for you. (Dennis): We want you to become as comfortable and as familiar as possible with the output that has resulted from our prayer, thought and planning to bring us to where we are today. *The trustees affirm that, in keeping with our Acts 1:8 mission, and the mission and vision of Brentwood Baptist Church,*

the creation of regional campuses that remove geographic and social barriers, in under-reached communities, should be a primary strategy in carrying out this vision. In faithful obedience to this mission and vision, the trustees recommend that a South Campus implementation team be formed to proceed with developing and implementing a plan to be approved by the trustees for the first Regional Campus to be located in the Thompson's Station/ Spring Hill area. The church authorizes the trustees to negotiate and execute in the name of the church such contracts and documents as may be required to implement the South Campus plans. The church further authorizes the trustees to use existing and future budgeted and designated funds for this purpose in accordance with the BBC Bylaws. As Steve Smith mentioned earlier in the service, you have a lot of handouts in the bulletin, and among those is a sample ballot. The reason it is a sample is that we are not voting today, but you will be voting on November 16th and November 23rd, the same weeks that you will elect new trustees. So please read over it again, become familiar with it, and then take advantage of an opportunity to even learn more in the second of two Town Hall meetings, tonight after the evening service at 6:30, in the Inman Deaf Chapel. We invite you to please come, listen, learn, get questions answered, and above all—and most importantly—pray.

(Mike): Now I know. The economy's this way, the economy's that way. A lot of you are in businesses that have made decisions to hold back expansion. And here we are talking about starting an entirely new congregation. How is that going to work? I believe God has figured out how to finance the kingdom. I don't believe this economic adventure caught Him off guard. I think He has a plan. It's called the tithe.

In a few days you will be getting your envelopes in the mail. We have simplified this for you. There will be a white envelope that says "Tithe." This is the 10% of your income, given to God's work that supports the work through Brentwood Baptist Church. There is a blue envelope that says "Offering." This is for all of those "above and beyond the tithe" gifts, such as The Hope for the World Mission offering you will be hearing about in the next few weeks. The Benevolence offering and all of those other ministries that are supported by our offerings will go into the blue envelope. White one: Tithe. Blue one: Offering. Now if you get your envelopes and you're confused, call me back and I'll talk you through it. Okay?

This is the way that we tell the world that our confidence is not in plans or strategies. Our confidence is in the God who is the Creator and Owner of all.