

COTTAGE GROVE EC CHURCH ANNUAL CONGREGATIONAL MEETING

Sunday, January 28, 2024

PASTOR'S REPORT

My Dear Church Family,

It seems to me like each year passes more quickly than the last. Here we are in 2024 – where did 2023 go? And this might be me getting older, but it also feels like it's harder to differentiate one year from another. They all start to meld together, like ingredients in a soup.

But Cottage Grove has been blessed by God with some good soup! And here are a few of the ingredients that made up the contents of our bowl in 2023:

- Our worship attendance increased to an average of 45 people per Sunday. The average attendance for small churches in America is 50-60 people per Sunday. So, we are near average in this regard. Yet what is above average, in my opinion, is the enthusiasm of our congregation. You all show up on Sunday morning because of your love of God, your friendships with one another, and your desire to serve. Not every church has that experience – so, thank you! I also want to thank Michelle for giving the announcements, Kris and Christian for managing sound, and everyone who helps with greeting, taking attendance, and collecting and counting offerings. You make every Sunday run so smoothly!
- We had 3 vow renewal services this past year. Special congratulations to Harry and Valerie Looney on their 40 years of marriage. Also, to Dick and Sherri Sitz on their 50 years together! We also were very honored to have 7 of our church family be baptized in our church this past year: Jordan, Ryker, Justin and Amanda Westover, and their three children, Gabriella, Averie, and Jayce. I'm so proud of all of you for committing your life to Christ and sharing your faith publicly with us. I also want to thank Rick and Trenton Glauthier, both of whom selflessly step up and rearrange their schedules to have our baptistery in working condition whenever it is needed.
- In 2023, we had 7 prayer groups and Bible studies with an average weekly attendance of 38 men, women, teens, and children. These groups offer a fantastic space for community, learning, and sharing God's love. I'm very grateful to those of you who have taken it upon yourselves to lead one of these groups. If you'd like help starting a new group or would like more information about the groups we have already, please do not hesitate to ask. I would love to see everyone at our church participating in at least one group.

- Financially, we've done very well. Kris, our Treasurer, will have much more to say on this later, but in 2023 we were able to give enough to meet our expenses. We met our missions giving goal in November and also funded several needed renovations. We need to thank Kris, Becky, our stewards, and everyone who serves and gives faithfully. If you aren't giving yet, we'd love to have your help meeting our goals for 2024 and beyond.

And speaking of 2024 and beyond – what does the next year hold in store for Cottage Grove Church? Well, only God knows for sure, but I am praying and focusing on our *purpose* as a church.

Some of you may be familiar with Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in California, and author of several helpful books. In his book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, Pastor Rick talks about the motivators that often drive a church. They include things like tradition, personality, finances, programs, buildings, events, and seekers. But none of these moves a church forward like purpose. "Nothing," Pastor Rick writes, "precedes purpose. The starting point for every church should be the question, 'Why do we exist?' Until you know what your church exists for, you have no foundation, no motivation, and no direction for ministry" (Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 81).

I love our church's mission. I try to say it at the beginning of every Sunday service. Do you know it? The mission of Cottage Grove church is to know the love of God, grow in the love of God, and show the love of God. God's love needs to be at the center of who we are and what we do, because we are nothing without the love of God. As the Apostle John wrote in 1 John 4:7-12:

"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us."

Having said that, it's important for every church to revisit their mission, adapt or redefine their purpose around that mission, effectively communicate that purpose, organize ministries around it, and apply their purpose in everyday life. Why? Because, as Pastor Rick states, a clear purpose builds morale, reduces frustration, allows concentration, attracts cooperation, and assists evaluation. Proverbs 29:18 emphasizes the importance of purpose when it says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

Exploring and redefining our purpose as a church will take time – I'm not expecting to come back next week with a beautifully-crafted, awe-inspiring purpose statement. It also doesn't revolve around one person's ideas. As your pastor, I want to do my part to help keep our church following God and moving forward. But I rely heavily on the help and input of our Ministry Council and other volunteers. And I would love to hear your thoughts as well! We can't do everything, but we do want to hear

from everyone, if possible. And if I'm the only one who cares, that's fine! But, again, as your pastor, I want to be intentional about seeking and completing the work of God in our church.

Whatever we do and wherever we journey together in 2024 and beyond, there are two things I know that I want to emphasize. And here they are:

1. At the core of our purpose is Christ. I'm reminded of the lyrics of one of my favorite hymns: "Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart. Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art. Thou my best thought, by day or by night. Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light. Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise. Thou mine inheritance, now and always. Thou and Thou only first in my heart. High King of Heaven, my treasure Thou art." Without God, nothing is possible. With God, all things are possible. I believe this church is doing and can do amazing things – but our earthly accomplishments, apart from God and His love, are meaningless. I would rather we be faithful and ineffective than unfaithful and effective. But I think we are and can be both. And we can't keep Christ at our center without spending time with Him, in prayer, listening to His Word, and experiencing Him in our world. I urge you all to consider, if you aren't already, prioritizing time with Jesus as a regular part of your life.
2. Everyone in this church matters. Whether you've been here your whole life or a couple of years. Whether you're a prayer warrior or struggle to approach God. Whether you're a Bible Study leader or an usher or a volunteer in the kitchen or a teenager or in your golden years or ... you get the idea. Whoever you are, you matter to God and you matter to this church. I don't personally have the relationship I'd like to have with all of you. There are some connections that I thought would grow organically that just haven't. If you feel like I don't know you or haven't given you enough of my time or attention – I apologize for that, and I'm trying to be more active about showing my interest and care. And if you've ever felt neglected, slighted, or insulted by someone in this congregation – past or present – I'm sorry for that, too. I wish it didn't happen, but it does. And I hope that, if you can, you'll be able to forgive and reconcile and stay a part of our church. But none of that subtracts from your value as a person or a created and special child of God. We need all of us. We are the Body of Christ on earth, called to do His work, and we must be of one accord to do that. As the Apostle Peter encouraged, "Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind" (1 Peter 3:8).

Thank you all for your commitment to Christ and to this church. Thank you for all you do and the way you love and pray for me and my family! Thank you for being you! I love you all and pray that God guides, grows, and blesses you in the coming year. Keep the faith!

In Christ – Pastor Andrew Carr