

A vision for the Next Generation of Leadership at Central

2003 was a turning point year for Central as the church moved into its new location. We needed new facilities because we were out of space. Were you there for that opening Sunday? I'll never forget sitting in the worship center that first Sunday and seeing nearly every chair already full as people celebrated the new chapter the church was beginning. I was a junior at A&M at the time, and I vividly remember a combination of enthusiasm and uncertainty in the congregation. There was excitement about new facilities and the opportunity for growth. But there was also apprehension about changing locations and adjusting to different surroundings.

Little did we know, 16 years ago, that the move into this new location would mark, almost exactly, the halfway point of Chris and Peggy's tenure at Central. There was also no way for me to know that, when I sat in the crowd on that first Sunday, God would open up the door for me to serve on staff at Central just a year later. In many ways, it feels as if the foundation of my ministry experience began when this current location launched. It was a turning point for the church and myself at the same time.

Now, after 16 years, Central faces the start of another new chapter. Only this time, it is not centered around the changing of its location but the changing of its leader. I imagine that the same combination of enthusiasm and uncertainty is rippling through the congregation. What will the church be like 16 years from now in 2035? How can the church enter a new season that applies its faithfulness in the past to its challenges in the future?

As I mentioned in my letter of interest, an unusual thing happened in January of 2019. God laid a vision on my heart for the next generation of leadership at Central. I mapped out a multi-page document articulating ideas for the future of the church rooted in three core foundations: gospel, mission, and community. What you will find below is a revised version of that vision that charts a course for the next chapter of leadership at Central. This document captures a framework for how I would approach pastoral leadership. Therefore, it primarily focuses on foundational elements rather than specific ideas and initiatives that would be more appropriate to discuss later in the search process. I look forward to discussing the possibility of working together to shape the next generation of leaders through Central.

The Next Chapter of Leadership at Central

What should the next chapter of Central look like? The short answer is: a lot like the current one. In 2025, Central will celebrate its 100 year anniversary as a church. The impact this church has had on the Brazos Valley and beyond will only be truly known once we get to heaven. Central is in an unusual transition. Most churches find themselves searching for a new pastor because of a difficult situation: perhaps because of a moral failure, because of the prior pastor moving on to a "bigger and better" opportunity, or because of a sustained pattern of church

decline. Instead, Central finds itself in the rare circumstances of replacing a beloved pastor who is finishing well with someone who will lead a healthy church. If the next chapter of Central is going to build on Chris's legacy of leadership by the power of the Holy Spirit, several things must be true.

First, Central's next chapter must recommit to the right purpose. Ever since I served on staff at Central, I have been captivated by its mission: a passion for Jesus and a vision for people. The heart behind that purpose must mark the next chapter at Central. Some people think of Central as a college church that happens to be in a thriving city. Others think of Central as a multi-generational church that happens to be near a college. But the reality is that both of these things are true at the same time. Though the mission field of the church may change in the future, its mission should not. What many churches need during pastoral transitions is change. But Central doesn't need change; it needs continuity. It doesn't need renovation; it needs refinement. A new moment but the same mission. A new pastor but the same purpose.

Second, Central's next chapter must embrace the right leadership. As the pastor profile document points out, calling a new pastor is like an organ transplant. Any successful transplant requires that the new organ isn't just the right fit as a body part but also compatible DNA. When the blood types match, it helps to ensure that the new organ will be grafted in and accepted by the host body. The same is true for a new pastor. There needs to be alignment in terms of convictions, competency, and culture. The next pastor must be an intentional shepherd who lives in a way that is consistent with the qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and earnestly cares for the flock in a way that is consistent with Paul's pattern in 1 Thessalonians 1. The next pastor of Central needs to have the wisdom of Solomon, the courage of Daniel, the shepherd's heart of David, and the humility of Jesus to lead the church effectively in this next chapter.

Third, Central's next chapter must deploy the right strategies. Even if Central preserves the right purpose and selects the right leader, it will also need the right approach if it is to thrive in its next season. The good news is that the fundamental essentials for a healthy church are in place: sound convictions, solid expositional preaching, stable leadership, and substantive ministries. Therefore, the key to deploying the right strategy is to enhance the church's existing strengths, and capitalize on its future opportunities. The next pastor at Central will have the opportunity to leverage the vast experience of the ministerial staff to enhance the church's discipleship strategy. Regardless of what strategies the church deploys, the next pastor must ensure that it never loses its heart for prayer, knowing that all our efforts are futile apart from God's power.

Fourth, Central's next chapter must cultivate the right relationships. Ministry impact happens in the context of relationships. This is especially true in a unique ministry context like Bryan-College Station. Even though I haven't lived there for 15 years, there is a sense in which I have never left because of the relationships I have cultivated. For the next chapter of Central to thrive, the new pastor must develop the right relationships. Of course, this begins within the church itself as he intentionally invests in Central's people. But it extends into the community, as the church seeks to impact the city around it. These community relationships are especially

important when it comes to the university, as I have learned firsthand through cultivating connections with key campus leaders such as President Young, Vice President of Student Affairs Danny Pugh, and many others. These relational efforts should expand beyond the Brazos Valley as Central continues to make an impact in Texas and around the world. If Central can align the right purpose with the right leader who deploys the right strategies through the right relationships, the future is bright for the next chapter of the church.

The Purpose of the Church: Gospel. Mission. Community.

Gospel. Mission. Community. The New Testament articulates these three core elements as central aspects of the church's purpose. Therefore, they must be the foundation for Central's mission of a passion for Jesus and a vision for people. These three elements provide a framework for the future that can center the church on the gospel, strengthen its mission to disciple the world for Christ, and transform its community into a vibrant outpost of the kingdom of God. As Central prepares for the next chapter, how should the foundational elements of gospel, mission, and community shape the direction of the church?

Gospel.

Every week as I walked into Central, I saw these iconic words from LifeWay's founder J.M. Frost above the door entering the worship center, "We accept the Scriptures as an all-sufficient and infallible rule of faith and practice, and insist upon the absolute inerrancy and sole authority of the Word of God." The future of Central must start where the inerrant and authoritative Word of God leads; to a focus on the gospel of Jesus Christ. What is the gospel? It is the good news of how God sent his only son as a conquering king to defeat Satan, sin, and death through his substitutionary atonement and victorious resurrection so that the church might reach all nations with the message of salvation as we await the restoration of all things.

Central should continue to be a gospel-centered church known for what Darren Dochuk called a "Texas Theology" that holds fast to "certain core tenets--the primacy of individual conversion, the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible, and the scriptural injunction to witness for Christ." But the distinctive element of "Texas Theology," according to Dochuk, is not just the doctrine but the disposition. He notes that it was the way evangelicals in the South "upheld them that set them apart. One could say that they exuded 'Texas theology.' Certain of the absolute rightness of their doctrine, unwilling to compromise this doctrine but always open to new ways of proselytizing it, and dedicated to strong, single-minded leaders, southern evangelicals displayed a gritty determination and a spirit of pragmatism that distinguished them." Central has embodied this "Texas theology" for decades under Chris's leadership, even as the culture around it has shifted away from God's design for the world. Whether in its biblical teaching, passionate worship, or authentic ministry, Central must continue to keep the gospel at the center to flourish during its next season.

Mission.

Amazon. Kindle. iPhone. Instagram. Twitter. Netflix streaming. Audible. Snapchat. Airbnb. iPad. Spotify. Uber. Dropbox. Alexa. Even the Mike Sherman era of Texas A&M football. None of these things existed in 2005 when I was a newlywed working full-time in my first ministry assignment as Central's associate college minister. Who knows what is on the horizon right now that will transform the world around us during the tenure of the next pastor. It can be easy for churches to lose sight of their purpose as they try to react to the cultural shifts around them. Regardless of what changes in the culture, the mission of Central must remain the same: a passion for Jesus and a vision for people.

The church is the primary means God has established to advance the kingdom, share the gospel, and serve the world. Therefore, every aspect of Central's mission should be shaped by every aspect of the gospel. From student ministry to SNAC, from college ministry to counseling, from legacy adults to leadership development, from women's ministry to worship, Central must embody a gospel-shaped mission in all it does. A future vision for Central must embrace how the gospel shapes its strategy, its staff, and its service. The mission must fuel evangelism, prayer, and discipleship. Therefore, the next pastor at Central needs to wake up everyday thinking about how to partner with the staff and key leaders to equip the church to strengthen its passion for Jesus and its vision for people so that it can effectively live on mission.

Community.

One of the most unforgettable days during my tenure at the ERLC was the last time I was at the White House for strategic meetings. After catching up with an old friend who works in Vice President Pence's office, I joined other faith leaders to discuss the opioid crisis in America. The surge in drug use mirrors other indicators of despair in the culture including rates of depression, suicide, and loneliness. The need for community is all the more pressing in today's society as it faces a loneliness epidemic. Suicide and depression rates are at record highs. Drug overdoses from those who are disillusioned are soaring. To make things worse, the cultural moment we live in is increasingly polarized. Citizens often retreat to their geographical enclaves of like-minded people and inflame controversy toward those who are outside their tribe. Our culture is in desperate need of the kind of community that churches can foster through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Author Wendell Berry's distinction between a road and a path can illuminate the proper approach to creating community. Berry laments the way that most roads are constructed through the use of force, with no regard for the unique contours of the setting, in order to mass produce the most efficient roadway for travel. In contrast, paths (e.g. a hiking trail) materialize over time through repeated use in a way that maximizes effectiveness while respecting the unique terrain it traverses. One is mass produced, the other is custom crafted. Central's approach to community should use paths, not roads.

The recipe for fostering healthy church community features several key ingredients. Healthy community begins by cultivating the right rhythms. The daily rhythms of a family become the destiny of a family. The patterns of a family reveal the priorities of a family. The same is true for a church community. Next, healthy community depends on deep relationships. One of the best ways a church can serve its community is not just through the Bible passages that are taught but also through the bonds that are formed through living on mission together. Deep relationships can enable people to persevere in their love for Jesus even in difficult moments. Last, healthy community thrives most when church members rally together in their call to spiritual warfare. There are few things that Satan loves more than a lonely church member. The community of the church is called to be a band of joyful warriors engaging in spiritual battle against the forces of evil for the sake of the kingdom of God. If the next pastor at Central can renew a compelling vision centered on how the gospel shapes the mission to serve the community, then the church will thrive during its next chapter.

The Three Primary Types of People at Central

Please allow me to take a moment to introduce you to “Brentwood Becky.” You’ve never met her, but you already know her. She is a mythical woman who represents the stereotype of the Christian radio audience: a middle-aged, suburban, soccer mom who listens to Christian radio between errands as she sips her pumpkin spice latte. When I have joined my Music City friends who write Christian music for song-writing sessions, they regularly talk about crafting music for Christian radio with “Brentwood Becky” in mind. Rather than imagine a broad audience for their songs, they think about how this particular woman will hear the lyrics and experience the music.

When you clarify the identity of your constituency, it enhances the effectiveness of your efforts. What’s true for Christian songwriting is true for a church. Understanding who your people are will inform how you reach them. Whether Central has a “Brentwood Becky,” it is full of three primary types of people that compose the core constituency of the church. The next chapter of Central will flourish most if it understands these three demographics in the congregation. The Apostle Paul speaks of the church as being one body made of many members, so it is helpful to understand more about some of the key body parts at Central (1 Corinthians 12:12-27).

First up, let’s meet “Frank, the family man.” His family is active in the Bryan-College Station community as they raise growing kids who love the new children’s facilities at the church. When I have preached at Central a couple of times in the past 18 months, I have been so encouraged to see the growing number of families with kids! People like Frank, the family man, are the heart of the church who provide the stability and activity the church needs to flourish. Families are the core constituency of the congregation. People like Caleb Venable in the church are the key audience to reach and equip. As the next chapter at Central unfolds, it must start with serving “Frank” and all the other families in the congregation.

Next up, let’s meet “Larry, the legacy adult.” He is an empty nester who met his wife Laura at A&M, and they moved back to town to enjoy retirement in Aggieland. People like Larry, the

legacy adult, are the head of the church who provide the wisdom, experience, and financial support the church needs to thrive. Every time I am at Central, my parents reconnect me with plenty of other legacy adults like our longtime friends Dave South or Reggie Holzer. As the next chapter at Central unfolds, it must shepherd “Larry” and all the other legacy adults in the congregation.

Last, let’s meet “Angie, the Aggie.” She was a key leader in her church’s youth group in Abilene who now regularly attends Breakaway and is loosely involved in Central’s college ministry when she is in town on the weekends, as she pursues her health degree. People like Angie, the Aggie, are the hands of the church who provide the energy and momentum for its future. For the last 20 years, I have helped to facilitate an ongoing campus Bible study and an annual Aggie Men’s Retreat investing in future leaders who are the mirror image of Angie. As the next chapter at Central unfolds, it must engage “Angie” and all the other Aggies in the congregation.

Central is one church with many members. One body with many parts. Though these are the three primary types of people in the church, there must only be one central. Clarifying unique identity can foster intentional unity. The goal of labeling each type of person in the church is not simply to understand them but to reach them. As Bryan-College Station continues to diversify, Central should welcome the opportunity to reach an even broader array of people. The apostle Paul calls church leaders “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12-13). They can’t equip those they don’t understand. But understanding can lead to unity that facilitates effective equipping. Imagine what it could look like for the next chapter of Central to be marked by every member on mission.

Training the Next Generation of Christian Leaders

As Chris heads into the next season of his life to train future ministers at Southwestern, I will forever remember that I was one of his first seminary students. How could that be since he isn’t yet a professor in Ft. Worth? For a short season, Central had a partnership with Southwestern that briefly made it a training hub. My first seminary course was introductory Greek with Chris Osborne, meeting every week at the church. Even though that was 15 years ago, I recall it like it was yesterday because the opportunity combined practical ministry training with substantive theological learning in a way that has profoundly shaped me.

If you asked me to summarize what God has called me to do in ministry, it is this: to train the next generation of Christian leaders. My passion for training leaders has grown, in part, through watching Chris Osborne do it over the last several decades at Central and through his annual CAPS retreat for pastors. Over the past seven years of my life, training next generation leaders has occurred in the context of the ERLC as we have equipped thousands of pastors to navigate the culture in light of the gospel. Prior to that, training next generation leaders occurred in the context of Southern Seminary as we prepared thousands of future pastors for a lifetime of

ministry effectiveness. Originally, training next generation leaders began in the context of college ministry at Central as we invested in thousands of Aggies to integrate their faith into every aspect of life.

As I crafted this vision document earlier this year, it sparked several ideas about what it could look like for Central to train the next generation of Christian leaders. This final section offers a first glimpse of what the next chapter at Central could become. I am not spending an extended time fleshing out these concepts because these areas would be my highest priority if I were to be your next pastor. But I've provided greater detail here because these are new areas I passionately believe can build on Chris's legacy and profoundly shape the church's future.

First, Central's strategy for training next generation leaders would center around developing the Central Institute, which would offer accelerated ministry preparation for future Christian leaders. The Central Institute would reimagine theological training for the modern moment, rooted in the three core elements of gospel, mission, and community. Through in-person seminars, online learning, and ministry experience, students would receive biblical, theological, and practical foundations for effective ministry. My friends at The Village Church in Dallas train over 200 of their church members a year in a similar program, with over 40 of them enrolled in their seminary track who are working toward a degree. Can you imagine what an impact it could have if the Central Institute not only trained the key lay leaders at Central but also established a pipeline of college students on an accelerated path toward ministry leadership?

Second, Central's strategy for training next generation leaders would grow the staff impact through a ministry internship and residency program. What if you could triple the size of the ministerial staff at Central from 13 to 40 by the time the church celebrates its 100th anniversary in 2025, without a major shift in the budget? It seems impossible, but I work closely with several churches around the country who have implemented this type of model. Many Aggie students who are called to ministry uproot their life to move to seminary once they finish college. But, what could it look like to create a 1-2 year ministry training pathway for them to raise their own financial support, train through the Central Institute, and gain practical ministry experience serving under Central's ministerial staff? I believe that, in a very short amount of time, you could have dozens of interns and residents serving for a season at Central before they move on to future ministry leadership. I could envision Central's legacy adults mentoring these younger leaders to infuse wisdom in them as they start their ministry journey. I could imagine these interns and residents investing in the lives of children and youth through intentional discipleship. The impact of this experience, not only on the students but also on the entire church, would be profound.

Third, Central's strategy for training next generation leaders would thrive within a renewed focus on leadership development beyond the church. Earlier this fall, I had the chance to attend the celebration for the 30th anniversary of Breakaway. I met a pastor named Michael who came through Central's college ministry under Kyle Hoover and me, who expressed deep appreciation for the church's impact on his life. What if Central cultivated those relationships beyond the

annual CAPS retreat by establishing the Central Network; a collective of like-minded pastors and churches for the sake of fellowship and equipping? One of the greatest joys of my role at the ERLC is serving as a “pastor to pastors” around the country. I get a front row seat to cultivating relationships, troubleshooting difficult situations, and fostering partnerships. I have even started hosting an annual pastor retreat like CAPS to invest in key leaders. The Central Network could amplify the impact of the church beyond the Brazos Valley.

Fourth, Central’s strategy for training next generation leaders would enhance the church’s global impact through missions mobilization. My friend J.D. Greear, who is the president of the Southern Baptist Convention, often talks about how churches should be measured not by their seating capacity but by their sending capacity. I would put Central’s sending capacity up against any other church in America. Last month, I collaborated with a select group of college ministers and leaders from the International Mission Board and North American Mission Board. We are developing a nationwide missions mobilization strategy to deploy college students for two years after they finish school. As I sat in those meetings, I couldn’t help but dream about what that could look like at Central. Imagine an intentional effort that begins with reaching the thousands of international students at A&M and culminates in sending dozens of missionaries around the globe.

What if this new approach to training next generation leaders could happen with minimal financial strain on Central? I believe this mobilization strategy would offer a compelling opportunity for donor support. For example, what could it look like to host an annual “homecoming weekend” at Central in which we invited Aggies who came through Central to spend a part of a fall football game weekend with the church. Perhaps we could invite Chris to come back to preach that weekend and then host a homecoming weekend lunch at my parents’ house featuring food and fellowship. But we could also invite them to financially support these next generation initiatives at Central as a way to give back to the church that made such an impact on them. I even think the legacy adults at Central would be so encouraged by the way this effort would shape the next generation of leaders.

A Strategic Opportunity to Shape the Future of Central

Cami and I are raising four boys, from ages 4 to 10. One seems like he could be the next Steve Green, leading a successful business like Hobby Lobby with Christian values. One seems like he could be the next Troy Aikman, finally leading the Cowboys back to the Super Bowl. One seems like he could be the next Bill Flores, serving as a statesman grounded in his Christian convictions. But, after the other one did a school report on Neil Armstrong, I can’t help but wonder if he could end up as an astronaut.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the historic Apollo 11 moon mission. Everyone remembers Neil Armstrong for his leadership and Buzz Aldrin for his legacy. But do you recall that there was actually a third man on Apollo 11? As I recently read the book *Rocket Men* by Craig Nelson, I was struck by the story of this third man, Michael Collins. The success of the

mission couldn't have happened without him. Unless Collins was there to prepare Armstrong and Aldrin for success and preserve the spaceship in orbit as the others raised the American flag on the moon, the mission would have failed. If my son grows up to be an astronaut, I hope he is just like Michael Collins—combining humility and capability for the success of others.

America could not have achieved its “moonshot” mission without Michael Collins. I believe that finding a Michael Collins-type leader is essential for the future of Central. Collins committed to this innovative mission by putting others in a position for success. He was an indispensable part of the mission without having to be an inescapable focal point of the accomplishment. He was the last one to shape the astronauts before they were sent out on the biggest mission of their lives.

Integrity. Intentionality. Investment. These characteristics that marked Michael Collins sound just like the traits needed in the next pastor at Central. Like Collins, the next pastor will lead an effort to equip others to carry out the biggest mission of their lives. It would be a privilege to have the opportunity in the future to dialogue about the specific, intentional strategies we could deploy together to shape the next chapter at Central. I believe the best days are ahead for Central, as it seeks to build on the remarkable legacy that Chris is leaving. I'm excited to explore the possibility of how my family could fit into that future. As this selection process plays out, I am committed to pray for you as you prepare to take one small step for your search committee, but one giant leap for Central.