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Central Pastor Search Committee
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I still remember the first time I stood in the pulpit at Central to preach from God's word. It was a Sunday night service in June 2004, and Chris had invited me as the newly minted Associate University Minister to preach from my favorite Bible passage, Isaiah 25:1, which states, "Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done wonderful things, things planned long ago." I'll never forget that sermon. Not because it was particularly good or the crowd was particularly responsive. In fact, other than perhaps my future wife, Cami, I imagine no one else from the audience recalls that message from 15 years ago.

The reason I'll never forget that sermon is not because of the message itself but because of the phone call I received right after as I drove home from church that evening. A mentor had called to inform me that one of our college students had been in a serious wreck. It immediately put my faith in the God of Isaiah 25:1 to the test. My friend David Gilbert was driving home with two friends from camp when a sudden blowout caused the car to flip three times in the type of wreck you rarely see anyone walk away from. Yet, all three passengers, including one of his friends who was not wearing a seatbelt, had nothing more than minor injuries from the crash. However, the emergency room doctor refused to release David from the hospital until he and his parents agreed to see an oncologist the next day. Though the post-wreck x-rays showed no damage from the crash, they revealed that a more dangerous problem had been lurking undetected.

The next day when David visited the oncologist, he was soon diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. After extensive treatment, David conquered his cancer. However, it returned a short time after, and he was unable to beat it a second time. David always said, "If even one person's life is changed for Jesus because of my cancer, it was all worth it." Over 1,300 people gathered at his funeral. When the speaker asked for anyone in the audience to stand up if their life had been changed for Jesus because of David Gilbert, over 900 people in the room rose to their feet. What an impact for the Kingdom! Now, Texas A&M honors David's legacy by hosting the annual Gilbert Leadership Conference to encourage character and service through freshman leadership development.

I am praying for you, as a search committee, to have the same vantage point that David did during his battle with cancer: if even one person's life is changed for Jesus, then the efforts you are putting forth are all worth it. And I believe the kingdom harvest that will happen as a result of your courageous leadership is far greater than even the 900 whose lives were shaped by David. Satan hates faithful churches like Central. He would love nothing more than to subvert your efforts to find God's man for this role. That's why you must keep pressing on amidst the challenges and opportunities you face--the stakes are too high and the kingdom impact is too significant.

But God Had Different Plans

I'm a third generation Aggie. The 25th Aggie in my family, starting with both grandfathers. My parents have dedicated the sunset of their lives to investing in A&M and in ministries around Aggieland, hosting nearly one hundred groups in their home each year. I grew up assuming that my future was to be a faithful Christian business leader just like my dad. I came to faith when I was eight years old, following conversations that occurred with my parents and my pastor, not long after Vacation Bible School at First Baptist Church in Midland, TX. I had a chance to visit the church and see this baptistery for the first time in 30 years, earlier this week as I spoke at the SBTC state Baptist convention meeting. As a child who moved 11 times growing up, I watched my father live out his faith while climbing to the highest ranks of corporate America as a senior executive for Chevron. I had seen my older brothers thrive in private equity and the energy sectors. After graduating from high school in Houston, my plan was to follow in their footsteps as I started college at Texas A&M.

But God had different plans. I had decided during the fall of my sophomore year that I was going to run for yell leader, even though I would be a long-shot candidate since I was not in the Corps of Cadets. I began to build a coalition of support during the fall, but my life was miserable because of my efforts. Over Christmas break, God broke my desire to be a yell leader, and I instead headed back to school to resume my pursuit of campus leadership opportunities and my future in the business world.

But God had different plans. Because I had extra time on my hands that spring, I helped to lead a student organization called Impact, which puts on a 3 day spiritual retreat for incoming freshmen. As the camp speaker preached on God's calling on our lives, I had a profound encounter with the Lord in which he gave me an unmistakable call to ministry. In that moment, the Spirit broke my desires for corporate success and called me into vocational Christian ministry. As I processed this new calling with Chris Osborne and other leaders, I thought I would drop everything and quickly rush into ministry.

But God had different plans. Just a month later, I met an amazing girl from Abilene who soon became my girlfriend and then my wife. While married, I finished my graduate finance degree while working full time in the college ministry at Central, as I began to explore seminary for theological training. I wanted to study in Texas and train to be a pastor in the Lone Star State.

But God had different plans. I came across a leader named Russell Moore and invited him to travel down to speak to our college ministry at Central. That put Southern Seminary on the radar. After a campus visit, Cami and I loaded up a Uhaul and trekked to Louisville. I began to work for Southern Seminary as I completed my masters and PhD. As I was wrapping up my PhD, I began to pursue opportunities to head back to Texas for ministry.

But God had different plans. Instead, Southern Seminary asked me to be Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management. I taught systematic theology as I led all the student services departments on campus and worked with a team to drive academic innovation. In my role as Dean of Students, I functioned like a pastor to the entire student body. I also served as preaching pastor at a local church. It seemed like the next season of my life would be devoted to training Christian leaders in the campus context.

But God had different plans. In 2013, Dr. Moore became president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission and invited me to join him in Nashville as Executive Vice President. Around the same time, one of my best friends was preparing to plant a church in the Nashville area and brought me on as a bi-vocational preaching pastor. Each step in my story was different than I ever expected, harder than I ever realized, but better than I could have ever imagined. I have a dream job, leading a dream team, living in a dream city, serving a dream church, and raising a dream family.

So, why would I be open to leaving the ERLC to serve at Central? Because I can't help but wonder: does God have different plans? I was encouraged by the pastor profile shaping what you are looking for in this search. I'm sure you are focusing on finding a candidate with extensive senior pastor experience, who is committed to expositional preaching, and can lead a multi-generational church in the heart of a unique college town. I have no doubt that you will have many candidates who fit that profile.

But, if I may be so bold, I would like to make one request of you as a search committee: Would you be willing to ask God if he has different plans? What if God isn't pointing you toward the best available senior pastor from another church? What if God has used experiences in different leadership roles to uniquely prepare a candidate who doesn't fit neatly into the profile that others might assume? The pastor search video update said that your committee's guiding verse is Isaiah 30:21, "And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it.'" Throughout my life, God has had a different "way" for me than I ever expected, and it has always been better than I could have ever imagined.

A Release, a Vision, and a Calling without an Opportunity

As I stood in the wings of the Memphis Convention Center in April 2018, I had a powerful encounter with the Lord. The ERLC hosted 4,000+ attendees at our MLK50 conference to discuss the gospel and race on the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death. When I

looked out over the crowd as the final preacher spoke, I first felt a sense of gratitude at all that God had done through that event. Then, I felt a sense of fulfillment at all that God had done through our first five years at the ERLC. But then, I felt a sense of release from my role, as if this moment was the beginning of a transition point from one opportunity to the next.

For the last 18 months, I have attempted to be faithful to my role at the ERLC while also seeking the Lord about what might be next for me in light of this sense of release. Candidly, as a driven leader who prioritizes turning vision into progress, this has been a frustrating season of waiting on God. Yet, this time period hasn't been a dry season of turning away from the Lord but a rich season of seeking him.

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. Why would God grant me such a clear vision for a ministry that I was not currently involved in and a role that was not currently available? I discussed it with several close friends and wrestled with what to do about it since there was no sign at that time of Chris's possible departure. I even considered approaching Chris with this document to see if there would be enough alignment where it could make sense for me to come on staff at the church under him.

Then, in April of 2019, several interesting developments happened. On the same day that Chris preached in Southwestern's chapel, I encouraged my friend Randy Stinson, who is their provost, to consider bringing Chris on the faculty because it would be a great hire for them. As it turned out, Randy told me, Dr. Greenway was planning to have his first conversation with Chris about that possibility later that day. While Chris drove home from Ft. Worth, we talked about this possibility. Since then, I have discussed this transition a number of times with my friends in leadership at SWBTS or with Chris. But one conversation in that journey in particular stands out.

"Phillip, I believe you have a pastoral calling on your life." Those are the words Chris said to me just days later, during Easter week in April of 2019 as I sat across from him seeking advice on my next steps in ministry. He encouraged my pursuit of the pastorate by drawing attention to my love for expositional preaching and my commitment to investing in people. It was a sobering and clarifying conversation that I have prayed through and wrestled with over the last six months with my wife, closest mentors, and friends.

Release. Vision. Calling. I have experienced profound encounters with the Lord involving each of these over the last 18 months. But what has been missing thus far is an opportunity to bring them all together. Here's what I can't help but wonder: is it possible that God has been working in this unique way in my life to bring our paths together to explore this possibility at Central? This is the first pastor role I have ever expressed interest in. That's how unique and strategic I see this opportunity.

When I revisited our conversation about my pastoral calling over breakfast with Chris in August of 2019, he encouraged me to seek to pastor a church “like a Central.” One that is strategically positioned for multi-generational impact in a college town. One that is full of devoted followers of Christ who hunger for expositional preaching and effective leadership. One that is all in on God’s desire to reach the nations for Jesus. I see all of those realities at Central. And that is why, for the first time ever, I am submitting my resumé for a senior pastor opening. I can’t shake the release, the vision, or the calling.

After I preached at Houston’s First Baptist recently, Gregg Matte made a profound observation to me during lunch. In the Bible, God often calls people to a place more than a position. I sense that type of unwavering calling to Bryan-College Station. I lived in Emerald Forest as a kid. I was called to ministry, licensed, and ordained at Central. I have invested in the campus for the last decade remotely in a variety of ways: partnering with local ministry leaders like Chris and Breakaway’s Timothy Ateek, continuing to oversee a weekly college Bible study we started 20 years ago when I was a freshman, advising A&M administrators when they need guidance on religious liberty or LGBT issues, and so much more. Even though I have been gone for over a decade, I have never stopped investing in the Brazos Valley. It seems as if God has opened for me a “wide door for effective ministry” in Aggieland (1 Cor. 16:9).

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 of Central as we build on the remarkable legacy that God has used Chris to establish over the last three decades. I believe the best days are ahead for Central, and I’m excited to explore the possibility of how my family could fit into that future. As this search process plays out, I am committed to pray for you as you seek the one that God has prepared for this role.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "PRBA". The letters are stylized and connected.

Phillip Bethancourt
Executive Vice President, ERLC