



How Things Work

Week 3: Engage & Equip

Lori Lampert - 01/22/2023

What do you do when the flywheel breaks on your car? In the first place is that even a thing? Can it happen? Set aside for a moment how incorrect that question may be to you mechanics out there. If you were me, you would only know that the car isn't working and I need to get it to someone to fix it. And the question then becomes: Who can I trust to tell me what is wrong with my car? How many of us have asked that question? Seeking a mechanic who is skilled, honest, and willing to work on your vehicle?

I first became aware that a car could break down sometime in my late childhood. Mom and Dad would take the car to a place in Tuscaloosa, Alabama called "Mott's." Joe Mott was the owner and chief mechanic of the place. In my memory, the garage was kind of hidden in the trees with many cars in various stages of repair and disrepair scattered around. Dad trusted Mr. Mott. And he was Mr. Mott to me. He was held in very high esteem for his repair work and his trustworthiness—he would always deal with mom and dad fairly. And when Ben and I began to date, I learned that his mom and dad went to Mott's as well for their family's car repair needs.

When Mom and Dad moved to Georgia in the mid 70s, the name I remember is Mickey Kittle. I never even met the man because I never lived in Athens. But, I knew the name well. Again, Dad spoke of Mickey Kittle with a kind of awe and reverence we often use for well... Patrick Mahomes today. Dad, the

college professor, would rather leave a car for a much longer period of time under the care of Kittle's than with any dealership or at any place else that could repair a broken whatever faster. Dad trusted Joe Mott and Mickey Kittle.

Having a trusted reputation should be necessary in business, right?

Knowing that people will do what they say, not do what could potentially cause more damage, charge a fair price, and stand by their work will always be important. Our government has myriad rules and regulations meant to protect the consumer from fraud. I just finished watching the Netflix series on Bernie Madhoff and his financial empire based on a huge scheme of deception and corruption. There is an enormous cost when either these systems fail or are artfully avoided by human beings.

It makes sense, doesn't it, that the church, the representative of Christ on earth, the people who have been baptized and publicly claim to be followers of Jesus, should be above reproach? Shouldn't we be trustworthy far and away above any business or institution on the planet?

We, you and me, know better. This is nothing new. From the time the first house churches were formed following the resurrection of Jesus, human beings were struggling to live under his lordship. Love my neighbor? Let my yes be yes and my no be no? Turn the other cheek? Forgive? Most of the New Testament are letters written to these struggling Christians to instruct and encourage them. To help them manage the separation and fragmentation that humanity has always done to itself. Division and fallibility were part of their reality as well.

Bishop Robert Schnase describes a church this way: **Every congregation, large and small, is a tapestry of hope and hurt, a collage of experience and anticipation, a patchwork quilt of gifts, needs, fears, and aspirations. People come to connect to God and one another as well as to feel restored, reminded, remembered, and refreshed. They wonder**

what God has to do with all that's going on inside of them and in the world around them. They want to know that having a relationship with Christ changes their life. In their searching, God finds them, heals them, sustains them, and forms them anew.

Yet, despite our struggles, we are here once again two thousand years since those first churches were formed on this Sabbath morning. We've come to worship the Lord God as revealed in Jesus Christ. We've come young and old. Rich and poor. Believers and non believers.

We've come here, where the vision states our desire to be where Christ and the community intersect. And it is very fair for you to ask the question: "Can this church be trusted?" Will we do what we say? Will we seek to do no harm, and instead be about the work of healing and restoring as Jesus did? Will we steward the resources entrusted to us in the way promised? Will we admit when we have failed, repent our misdoings, learn from our mistakes, and—by the power of the Holy Spirit—continue to move forward, doing better than we did in the past?

The flywheel you have in the bulletin—and on our website—is The Downtown Church board's best attempt, at this moment in time, to describe how we work. It is a tool to use to keep us moving forward, adding the energy and creativity of everyone who calls this their church home, enabling us to be a community of faith that continues to grow the kingdom of God. Our flywheel is a way of understanding that although we cannot do everything, if we are faithful to these six steps, we are being faithful to our vision to be a place where Christ and the community intersect.

Last week, we talked about how we begin to push the flywheel by **Welcoming All**. All. It is the first and most necessary push. I invite you to put your neck on a swivel and notice who around you do not recognize. Not who is new, because really—unless you have been here since 2014—you could all be considered relatively new. But instead, notice who is standing alone, who

is walking in unaware of where the coffee is, and more importantly where the restroom may be found. Who has children and may not know about what is going to happen around 11 when there is a stampede upstairs? Who needs you to invite them to sit with you? You won't know unless you ask. Please make sure you have spoken to them before the morning is over.

The next push is to lean in, with the desire to love God and neighbor, and turn the flywheel further as we **Connect**. Put yourself in position to ask a second question. Beyond "How are you?" Seek to find common ground. Slow down. Come early for conversation. Stay late for conversation. Are you going out to lunch after church? Invite someone to join you. Begin to build a relationship.

Every time we gather—every time—I am well aware that there are people before me in all different places with their relationship with God. Authors Hawkins and Parkinson in their book *Move* describe those places:

- **Exploring Christ: "I believe in God but I am not sure about Christ. My faith is not a significant part of my life."**
- **Growing in Christ: "I believe in Jesus and I am working on what it means to get to know him."**
- **Close to Christ: "I feel really close to Christ and depend on him daily for guidance."**
- **Christ-centered: "My relationship with Jesus is the most important relationship in my life. It guides everything I do."**

And these authors and researchers were willing to ask the question:

Is our church really helping people to become devoted followers of Christ, or are we just giving them a nice place to go to church?

For The Downtown Church, I hope the answer is yes and yes. The next step in our flywheel is **Engage: Provide zero-entry opportunities to serve and get involved**. No matter where you are in your relationship with Christ, being in community with one another opens the door to possibilities of moving

deeper. So often we feel unprepared, or that we will be required to know the secret handshake or the password to fit in. We think everyone knows something we don't know. If there is a secret handshake here, nobody's told me.

We become able to see people more clearly when we get involved with others who call The Downtown Church their church. We move a little further along on our journey of faith when we sit at the table with someone who has opened their home for a Dinners Together this spring and hear their stories. We understand more about ourselves and our place in this world when we learn how others have experienced life and as we stand together to serve. Engaging through ushering, greeting, serving communion, working on a First Friday team, volunteering at Crosslines Food Pantry, helping students and staff at McGregor Elementary. These are ways the flywheel moves and gains momentum as we all lean in and engage.

And then another turn. This is vital. We must **Equip: Develop and deepen faith and spirituality**. We are the body of Christ. And to serve Christ well, we have to learn more about him. About his life, death, and resurrection. We need to understand who he was, is, and evermore shall be. Following Jesus doesn't just happen. It is not just doing the morally right thing. It is turning your life upside down and letting the Holy Spirit lead you. It is loving your enemy. It is walking another mile. It is taking up your cross and following him. We learn how that is possible in this world through letting ourselves become equipped. Outfitted with the knowledge of Holy Scripture, exploring the tenets and doctrines of faith, being in conversations around faith, and having safe places to question what sometimes seems—more than mysterious—out-and-out impossible.

These words of the Apostle Paul to the new church in Ephesus are important for all of us who are on this journey with Jesus to understand. From Ephesians 4 we read:

¹¹ He himself granted that some are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ¹⁴ We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming; ¹⁵ but speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

We will continue to offer small groups. Bible studies. Sunday morning classes. Soon, as the season of Lent begins we will have a time of worship and learning on Wednesday evenings we call Vespers. Each Sunday we will worship God with theologically sound music and messages.

We have 14 students exploring faith through confirmation. Our children will learn the stories of God that they need to hold in their heart. There are people in our congregation I know would love to have deeper conversations, and I would love to put you together. I love these conversations and would be honored to meet with you as well. Each year, each season, we need to keep pushing forward, equipping, as we promote this particular body of Christ to grow in love. All of us. As we seek to lead Christ-centered lives.

I asked JD Pate to spend some time with us this morning. JD recently stepped into membership at The Downtown Church. And while he—like all of us—is on this journey of faith, the movement JD made from well, really, not expecting anything of this church to serving side-by-side with his wife Carla in children's ministry, participating in small groups, working First Friday (and bringing a band with him), going to Dinners Together—it is extraordinary. JD, please join me.

JD is a writer by profession. A musician by vocation. And I am grateful he has become my friend.

JD:

I'm going to read this because I'm not a great extemporaneous speaker. And reading something this personal to all of you makes me feel a little exposed and uncomfortable. But sometimes—usually even—change is uncomfortable.

I first came to the Downtown Church in the Fall of 2018 with Carla, who I married here in 2020. I was a reluctant, skeptical attendee in the beginning. In fact, the first thing I said to many of the people I met here was something like "Hi. I'm JD. I'm an atheist."

I was raised in an evangelical fire-and-brimstone denomination, and when I reached a certain level of awareness as a teenager, I rejected it, forcefully. I became an evangelical atheist. Example: on a high school band trip to Disney World, a group of students were having a prayer group late at night in the back of the bus. I infiltrated it, deconstructed their religious reasoning, and even left a couple of them in tears. My band director—Mr. Trousdale, who was a devout Christian and later became like a father to me—was not happy. And believe me, you did not want Mr. T to be unhappy.

I continued to be a vocal opponent of all things religious in my adult life. It became part of my identity. In the spirit of the saying "keep your friends close but your enemies closer", I studied the Bible, looking for slings and arrows that I could use to assault proselytizing Christians, including the verse which is still my favorite: "Let he who is without sin among you be the first to cast a stone."

I read the works of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris, all men of incomparable intelligence, flawless logic, and profound hopelessness. All convinced that we exist in an inconsequential flicker of brief consciousness bookended by insensate and eternal darkness—that observable facts were the

only touchstones worth considering in life. This limited concept of how things work was my insular and somewhat selfish philosophy for most of my adult life.

Then came a turning point. I met Carla, the kindest, most beautiful soul I've ever known. She brought me to the Downtown Church. Something here was different, and as I met and had meaningful discussions with more and more of you, things started to shift in my mind.

Carla and I reached an inflection point early in our relationship where we had to reconcile our beliefs. After a long discussion in the café at Barnes and Noble, we realized that with love and work, it was doable. I changed then, and I continue to change, moving away from arrogant certainty and toward a more peaceful acceptance that I can't know everything—and that I don't need to know everything. It wasn't a blinding epiphany like Saul's on the road to Damascus or Saint Augustine's in Milan, but a small step in a new direction.

I'm still unsure of all the specifics of what I believe, or even what it really means to "believe" anything. Though I'm a writer, and words are my bread and butter, I don't have the language for this yet. That's scary, and could easily leave me speechless, or make me feel like a stranger in a strange land, but you at The Downtown Church have accepted me without question and with nothing but love. That has given me the courage to stand up here and read this today, even though I know that my concepts about these things aren't yet fully formed.

Just as I reached a level of awareness as a teenager that allowed me to reject the falsehoods of a punitive religion, I have reached a new awareness, now at the age of fifty, that I don't need to be absolutely sure of everything as long as I've got people around me that love me.

So here's where I am now. I have questions. I can't see very far ahead. But the difference between the old me and the new me is this: I can see a path forward today where there wasn't one before. I have you all at The Downtown Church to thank for that.

Every time someone is willing to enter the doors of this church, in person and online, it is an honor. With all of the places to go and things to do they have chosen to allow us the privilege of their time. They are trusting us, even if for a moment, to not harm them, to accept them, to give them space and safety to explore.

And the Holy Spirit is giving us the opportunity to join in the good that God is doing in this world. This is a sacred trust. Of much greater consequence than any business dealing. It is moving the world forward to being on earth as it is in heaven. Welcome all. Connect. Engage. Equip. Now we are really beginning to move.