



PASTOR RICK'S REPORT TO THE TOWN HALL

October 4, 2021

At the end of my first three months as lead pastor of Shepherd of the Hills, I want to share some observations based on my experience here so far. There are some advantages one has in being new to a church in that my observations can be made without the emotions that come from being a part of a community of faith for a long period of time. There are also some disadvantages that come with this perspective as I don't have the shared experience of the joys and struggles of both campuses trying to successfully live as one congregation with two different campuses. I want to start with my observations regarding some of the strengths of Shepherd of the Hills.

Both RSM and MV are clearly passionate about being the church and have faithful people who are doing well at being followers of Jesus Christ. This is evident even with the challenges of trying to be the church amid an ongoing pandemic. Such cannot be said of all the churches in our district, nor across the country.

Both campuses are clearly passionate about missions. The annual mission trip to Mexico is spoken of often by people from both campuses. I am deeply moved by the stories of lives changed through being in ministry with each other. I also feel the grief people have of not being able to do this trip during the pandemic. I know there is great hope of being able to return to Mexico in January to engage in this ministry that is far from home.

I am also impressed by the Community Table hosted on our RSM campus. This is a great outreach ministry meeting a critical need for people right here in the communities we call home. It is important for us all to remember that for people 35 and under, who are not connected with a church, it is primarily outreach and missions programs that attract them. Coming to worship and participating in more traditional spiritual aspects of church are secondary to hands on ministry that makes a difference in our communities and the world God has entrusted to us.

Both campuses are known for providing excellent worship music and both campuses do a good job of welcoming people to worship. And both campuses have strong and visionary persons in leadership positions that are committed to moving Shepherd of the Hills forward. These things and the other numerous strengths of Shepherd of the Hills need to be celebrated and built upon as we look to the future of our church. While doing this, we also need to take a honest look at things that need to be changed if Shepherd of the Hills is not going to just survive, but thrive.

Shepherd of the Hills is described as "one church with two campuses." While that is a wonderful concept, I do not believe it is an accurate description. I think it would be more accurate to say that Shepherd of the Hills is "two churches with one budget." My understanding is that when the merger initially took place, the vision of "one church with two campuses" is what was proposed. The vision of one church with multiple campuses is one that has been successful in a number of settings. It seems, however, that over the years the two campuses have moved away from a shared identity as one church and into an identity of two separate churches sharing the same governance system but with independent ideas of how to be the church. This has resulted in some conflict, particularly among key official and unofficial leaders that continues today.

It seems clear to me the model that has been used for being two campuses is not working and is resulting in ongoing frustration with the official and unofficial leadership of both campuses. In the long run, unless significant changes are made, I believe the survival of both campuses is at great risk. I also believe that RSM

and MV need each other in order to survive and thrive. I have shared these concerns with Pastor Jon and with the lay leaders of both campuses. There is strong agreement about these concerns as well as the changes I am proposing for us as we move forward.

There are a number of challenges that we face as we move into the future. Some of these are internal and some are external.

Internally we face frustrations and skepticism that have been brewing for many years. Mission Viejo is rightly concerned about church finances and tends to focus on RSM not bringing in as much money as it takes to run the campus. Rancho Santa Margarita is rightly concerned that the constant focus on finances makes it difficult to move forward with ministry. Mission Viejo is steeped in the Methodist tradition of how to “be the church” and how to govern it properly. They have a long tradition of making sure that we don’t move forward with ideas or projects until they are properly vetted and discussed by every necessary committee. RSM does not have that tradition and finds the traditional structure inhibits how they want to engage in their community. If we are going to be successful as a church there will need to be significant changes made by the leadership of both campuses.

Externally we are dealing with the ongoing pandemic. On the other side of the pandemic, we cannot “go back to the way things were.” For any church to do so will only ensure that it will not survive. We are all in a process of reinventing ourselves for being the church in and after this pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, Sunday morning worship services were rapidly declining as a means of attracting people to church. Now that churches are beginning to reopen their doors, we are finding many people who were a part of churches, particularly young people, have rediscovered Sunday mornings without church. As people are still dealing with having been couped up for over a year, they are now finding numerous opportunities for recreation on Sunday mornings. Unfortunately, going to church is not high on many people’s lists. Even at the largest UMC in the country, Church of the Resurrection, worship attendance is at 36% of what it was pre-pandemic. According to the Barna Group, 55% of people who identify as churchgoers say they are waiting until church services are back to “normal” before returning to church. And 73% of churchgoers say during the pandemic they are growing spiritually in ways other than church attendance.

All the current data indicates churches, both large and small, that do not put at least the same effort into being a church online as we do to being a traditional in person church will not survive. John Wesley’s belief that “the world is my parish” has never been more true than it is today. In the hybrid church of today and tomorrow, people that choose to join a church will join one they are drawn to whether they live near the physical church or not. The practice of many churches in the pandemic of receiving new members online is one that will need to continue as we seek to be a post pandemic church.

We also have the great unknown of what will happen with our denomination in the next few years. When General Conference meets, and it is not likely to happen in 2022, it will still be the 2020 General Conference and it will be deciding how our denomination will split. There are several scenarios to the coming schism and it remains to be seen how the split will affect Shepherd of the Hills.

In looking at our present reality, neither RSM nor MV is growing their membership significantly. The MV campus has a significant number of its members who are in the twilight years of their lives. Unless MV begins to grow its membership now, in anticipation of the attrition of the congregation due to natural causes, it will not survive. RSM is not currently capable of sustaining itself financially. Unless RSM begins to grow its membership and helps people learn the importance of stewardship as a spiritual discipline, it will not be long before it finds itself yoked to a campus that can no longer support it. The bottom line is Shepherd of the Hills needs both campuses to thrive in a future that is filled with uncertainty.

I am proposing some changes in how we function as one church with two campuses. These changes are supported by Pastor Jon and by the lay leaders of both campuses. These changes are not an exhaustive list of changes we will need to make, but they are a start. I am asking that we begin to implement these changes that will be evaluated in an ongoing manner. In October of 2023 we will then make a critical evaluation as to if the changes are helping to move us in a new direction or if we need to look at making some other decisions.

Over this two-year period, I would expect that both campuses will need to increase their membership by 10 percent. Additionally, we will need to evaluate our staffing needs in light of our current situation and our need for growth.

During this two-year period, it will be important for the pastors and lay leadership of both campuses to work together in discovering additional changes that will need to be made along the way. I would anticipate some of the needed changes will be minor corrections. I also anticipate some of the necessary changes will be more dramatic. We all know change is hard and painful work even when it is necessary. But unless we act together with a sense of urgency to change the trajectory of our church, the future of Shepherd of the Hills looks rather grim.

Below is a list of changes I am proposing for us to undertake beginning in Advent. As there does not seem to be any example of a successful multisite model that does not have unified themes and messages on all campuses, I felt it important to begin with our worship life. I expect the lay leadership of both campuses to work together with the pastors on proposing additional changes focusing on all of the ways we are in ministry together as Shepherd of the Hills.

INITIAL PROPOSED WAYS TO LIVE INTO THE ONE CHURCH WITH TWO CAMPUSES MODEL

WORSHIP

SERMONS

Beginning with the first Sunday of Advent (November 28), we move into a unified worship theme for both campuses. Pastor Jon and I would work collaboratively on scripture selections, sermon outlines and sermon titles. We would write the actual sermons independently based upon what we have planned. So, while the titles and themes would be the same, the sermons would be unique. I'm thinking of Pastor Jon and I switching "pulpits" maybe every eight weeks or so beginning in Advent might be helpful as well.

MUSIC

I'm thinking there could be some advantage to having our music personnel work collaboratively together as well. Perhaps not as closely as on the worship themes and sermons, but by having both campuses experience some of the same music on a regular basis. This would be more challenging when it comes to the choirs due to their being two different choirs with different skill levels, etc.

DESIGN

I'd like to see us move towards having very similar if not identical worship designs. Things like how often we celebrate the Eucharist and how we do it, where the offering and prayer time goes, etc. This would help people who might visit both campuses to experience similar worship services even though the sermons would be unique to each campus. I also feel it will be important to have some unified plan

as to how, if, and when we return to offering two worship services at each campus. I would like to see both campuses incorporating communion in worship for the Advent season and on Christmas Eve.

COMBINED SERVICES

I'd like us to explore offering periodic combined services where we worship as one congregation.

Possibilities might include:

- 5th Sunday Services
- Healing Services
- Special Themed Services such as Taizé, etc.

I think offering these at different times other than Sunday morning might be helpful.

YOUTH

I would like us to move towards more gatherings and activities that are for our youth from both campuses. I realize this may take some time. I realize there may be some challenges in doing this on a regular basis, but ultimately having two separate youth programs undermines the concept of SOTH being one church.

SEASONS TOGETHER

ADVENT

I'd like to see an Advent Study for both campuses with shared leadership between me and Pastor Jon.

LENT

I'd like to see a Lenten Study for both campuses with shared leadership between me and Pastor Jon. We could explore the possibility of doing this in conjunction with a simple shared meal with both campuses each week depending upon pandemic restrictions.

EASTER

I really think promoting the SOTH Easter Sunrise Service at the MV campus and including the RSM campus youth is a very positive way of being one church with two campuses.

CHRISTMAS 2022

With Christmas falling on a Sunday, I've got a big idea. We have separate Christmas Eve Services and a combined, prerecorded service for Christmas morning. I'm thinking big here. Bring in outside musicians (brass, strings, etc.), a big, combined choir number, combined bell choir, involving the youth, over the top music, Pastor Jon and I sharing leadership. Putting together a proverbial barn burner of a production that could even be recorded early, in pieces, with final mixing and editing happening the week before Christmas. Some parts could be recorded at RSM and some parts could be recorded at MV. The recorded service would then premier Christmas morning and our people could all enjoy Christmas morning at home and experience the prerecorded service for Christmas Day.