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## Glad and Sincere Hearts

### Part1 – The Purposes of Our church

Pastor Ted Cunningham

Today, we are going to look at these five purposes as an alignment. This is getting us all on the same page as a church. Before we do, I need to share something with our church. I've never had to share this in 30 years of ministry, but it's very important. I wouldn't use the word infestation, but we do have a squirrel problem at Woodland Hills Family Church. The squirrels around this campus are very comfortable with people and in the last month, we had two incidents where they got into the building. Earlier in December, one got in through an open door back here, ran through the back stage, through the hallway, through an office and ended up in Brenda's office. The squirrel ran up her leg, up her arm, and down her back. In the next office, Savohna immediately got up and slammed her door, so she didn't have to be involved. We're all on the same team here except when this crazed Mississippi... I'm sorry Missouri squirrel comes into the building. The good news is Brenda did get saved that day.

Then, two weeks later, it happened again out here. We just want to prepare you. If ever there's a time in one of our gatherings where someone jumps up and screams, "Something's got a hold on me," It's probably a squirrel. So, just settle down. They seem friendly. They're just passing through. But Brenda told me later that day, and she was looking for sympathy, but all I could do, and you can join me if you want, I just started singing with her, *"The day the squirrel went berserk in the First Self-righteous Church in that sleepy little town of Pascagoula. It was a fight for survival that broke out in revival. They were jumping pews and shouting..."*

We want to stir things up at this church, but hopefully not with a squirrel. So, part of our passion... And you see it on our website everywhere, is to inspire the family to become fully devoted followers of Christ. It's in everything that we do, and everything that we've talked about, all the gatherings we have on campus. You are going to see today the word gather in all five purposes. We're using that word more than services. You're not just here today at a worship service. You're here at a gathering of believers in Christ Jesus, who desire to be fully devoted followers of Christ. It's in everything that we do. Every time you step on this campus... and hopefully when you step on this campus, you experience this, but then you take it with you and it's part of your life.

These five purposes we're talking about today are not just for the church, but they are for your life. We believe that excellence in environment and experience honors God and inspires people. We should bring God our best, not half-hearted offerings, not half-hearted preparation. We should give it our all. We want you, when you step onto this campus... And if this is your first time there today, we hope you have already experienced this because we want you to leave, go get in your car, and not have a first thought of *He could have put more prep into that message. Or I didn't care for it when this or that*

*happened.* We want you leaving with this first thought in mind – You matter to God, and you matter to us. Then when you leave here, you are an ambassador for Christ out in this community and wherever your work takes you, you’re letting people know when they are encountering you, “you matter to God and you matter to me.”

We cover these purposes in Starting Point, and we want you to know that the next one you can sign up for is Tuesday, February 27. We hope at the end of the message today, you will go online and sign up to be a part of that. We provide a meal, and a lot of the staff will share and we’ll walk through what you can do to join our church, plug in, and become this five-purpose member of Woodland Hills Family Church.

We want you to know this about the purposes. We don’t pick a favorite purpose. We don’t prioritize a purpose. We don’t have one purpose that is most important, and the rest are not as important. We believe, as you’ll see today, through the Great Commandment given by Jesus, the Great Commission, given by Jesus, and how it is lived out when the Holy Spirit empowered the first century church, to live these purposes out. You’ll see all five purposes. If you have your Bible, we’re going to look at Acts 2: 42-47 today.

1. **We gather to express our love to God.** Every time we gather, we want to express our love for God. We sang four songs this morning together as a church and we want everything about worship music at Woodland Hills, to stir your affections for Christ. Not just stir your affections but stir your affections for Christ.

We read in Matthew 22: 37 the Great Commandment. ***Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all of your soul, and with all of your mind.*** But we want you to know this, and this is so important, **the purpose of worship is more than music.** If today is all you experience this week of worship, I’m here to tell you it’s not enough. You have to take it beyond these walls, you have to take it beyond this campus. I want to encourage you, because at the beginning of every year, you see people getting healthy online and posting what they’re doing. Some of you, in here, across campus, online, you’re getting healthy financially. And you spent too much money. Would you raise your hand if you spent too much money in December. Thank you for your honesty. So, you’re saying, “We are going to get financially fit in January and spend less.”

This is the most obvious – Physically fit. I can be honest with you. We consumed our daily calorie intake in one meal. It was too much. We looked back and we were like, “We going to exercise more, we’re going to walk more, we’re going to run, we’re going to eat less. So, we’re getting physically fit.

Some of you are getting mentally fit. I know many in our church told me today and told me last week that they’re off social media for a year. I’m just going to take a big guess at this. You’ll probably discover the world keeps spinning at the end of next year if you get back on it. Some of you may not have that desire. You’re like I’m fasting from it for my mental health.

Today we are talking about getting healthy. If you feel like you’ve drifted in your relationship with the Lord, these purposes are very important to consider and understand. You may be prioritizing one or two to the neglect of two or three. You may have one that you are really pouring yourself into, and this

may be one of neglect for many believers on campus today. I just want to encourage you to get a playlist. You know me. I can't tell you how many times I listened to the Mississippi Squirrel Revival by Ray Stevens today so I could give you that little chorus. I love country music. You know that and I'm not ashamed to share it; it's a passion. But I have to be reminded each and every day to turn it off and to turn on music that stirs my affections for Christ. For some of you, it's a play list. For others, it's prayer. Prayer is not a habit of your home, it's not something that you, from the moment you get up to the time you go to sleep at night, as you walk along the way, prayer is not a part of that. I want to encourage you to make that a part of your worship in the home. You don't even pray at mealtime. Some of you pray at mealtime, but you're like this year, we need to start praying outside of mealtime and before the kids leave the home and before we go to bed at night. It's more than music, but music is a part of it.

And this is very important. **Worship is not confined to a building or a day of the week. It has to go beyond our gatherings.**

2. **We gather to grow to become more like Jesus.** We say it this way at our church – We want the teachings of Jesus, yes, we want what the Word of God teaches, yes, but we don't just want to learn it, we want to live it, we want to practice it. We call that orthodoxy meeting orthopraxy. When we read Matthew 28: 20 in the scripture, this is part of the Great Commission. Jesus tells them, ***“Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you.”*** And sometimes, with our list, there are some things that we've added over the years that we do – spiritual disciplines, things that we know stir our affections for Christ and give us that fruit of the Spirit – Love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, kindness, faith, self-control. As we think through all of that, what are some areas that may be missing as we are thinking about what it means to look like Jesus, to walk with Jesus, to act like Jesus.

The first century church. We read in Acts 2: 42, ***They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching.*** This was at the foundation. We looked at this last week when Paul encouraged young Timothy. He said, “There are going to be people with their desires and lifestyles that don't want to hear it anymore, but you need, with great patience and careful instruction to keep teaching. And all of us should be committed to this as part of our gathering. It's what we're doing right now. And it says, And to fellowship. Fellowship there means sharing in the lives of other believers. So just like worship is more than, **discipleship is more than a sermon or a Bible study.** A sermon and a Bible study is a good start, but it's not enough. If this is the only time you are getting scripture this week, let 2024 be the year where you get a Bible reading plan, pull up the Bible app and you pick one and it will send the day's reading to you. You're going to go beyond this day.

Cathy Jensen says it all the time around here because when a Bible study ends at our church, people are like, “What's the next Bible study.” You need to be a self-feeder during that Bible study and between Bible studies. You personally. I need to be in the scripture each and every day. And you'll find that this is the one purpose that most people commit to start a Bible reading plan. But for many, there is no plan or comprehensive thought on how you are going to work through the scripture this year. I want to encourage you to take discipleship beyond what we do here on Sunday. If this is all the scripture you're getting today is all you're getting for the week until next week, I want to encourage you to take that step. Again, these are not just the purposes of our church, they are the purposes of your life.

3. **We gather to enjoy fellowship with one another.** You know this is a big one for me because I hear people say it all the time. “I don’t want to go to a church where all they do is have fun. They enjoy each other too much.” I’ve never understood the opposite of that. “I’m looking for a church where they don’t really get along all that well.” “I’m looking for a church where there is a lot of anger and hatred, and they are always at each other.” I’ve never understood that because you know a big purpose of our church is enjoying one another’s company. And it’s okay to enjoy company with one another. In Acts 2: 46, we read of the first century church, ***Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*** Because their affections were stirred for Christ. What did Jesus tell his disciples? ***“You’ll be known as my followers by the way you love one another. By the way you get along with each other.”***

I met with a pastor a couple of years ago and whatever you might hear about pastors in this town, you need to know we are friends. We get together, we text, we have a good time together. We have glad and sincere hearts with one another. A couple of pastors were meeting with another pastor in town to encourage him. One of the pastors asked him, “Tell me about your church.” And this pastor goes, “You need to understand something. I pastor the Jerry Springer Show.” You could tell where this pastor was at. We’ve all been there from time to time. The fellowship together requires us to prioritize caring for and loving one another. For my Baptist friends in here, you need to understand very clearly that **Fellowship is more than pot-lucks.** Eating is a part of it, but it goes beyond that. I just want to encourage you with this one because I know there are people... I hear all the time people that will come to our church and they’ll say, “I didn’t like that church over there because it was too cliquy.” I’m always listening when I hear that because a lot of times, people are saying, “I don’t fit in.” And it maybe isn’t that the church is cliquy or that group was cliquy; you just couldn’t find a way to fit in.

I just want to encourage anybody here today who you’ve had a hard time finding a church or fitting in at a church. Let this be between you and the Lord. This isn’t us coming down on you. I just want you to ask the question. But I want to encourage you with a couple of things. Stop making it all about you. This is where you get unhealthy. When you become a consumer in the church, and you walked in and you’re like “I didn’t like that. I didn’t like that. I preferred that. I didn’t see an altar call. The preacher doesn’t always tuck in his shirt. The worship team didn’t have all...” You start to become like me, me, me and What I like.” Stop making it all about you and watch how quickly you find a church home. To say it even more gently. Stop being so easily offended. Stop being so easily hurt. Or I’ll say it even more gently. Stop creating drama every where you go. You’re like that church is full of drama. You’re welcome, you’re here. If drama follows you everywhere you go, there you are. you have to decided, “What am I going to do in the new year?”

The church that prioritizes worship... and that’s the most important purpose. The pastor seems more like a worship leader and the congregates are seen as worshippers. In a church that prioritizes discipleship above all the other purposes, the pastor is supposed to be an expert Bible teacher and the congregates are considered Bible students. And they don’t feel like they’ve been to church unless they get Hebrew and Greek, and they are taking notes.

If you've been to a fellowship church... Many of us grew up in fellowship churches because they are very small. They have one or two staff members that can care for 200 – 300 people. About 70% of churches in the United States are 200 or less. Because they all want to know each other. What happens is they all come together and they have to know everybody in here. No, you can experience great fellowship in a large church if you plug into a small group. We call them home groups.

Coming up on January 14, is home group training. If you're wanting to be a home group leader... Again, these aren't ten-hour classes. You can come learn from our discipleship ministry teams. If you're looking for your sweet spot, you've joined the church and you've been to Starting Point, but you still haven't found a place to serve, which is the next purpose we're looking at, join that on January 21. January 25 is Group Link. You're like, "I'm ready. Fellowship is the one I've been missing." You can register on the Church Center app.

It's interesting of all the people I saw this week talking about I need to get back to reading the Bible, discipleship, I didn't see one person. I've never heard anybody say this. Like, "Hey, last year I went to church about 50% of the time. I gathered with believers about 50% of the time. And this year, I'm committed to going every time the doors are open. If there's a pencil for perfect attendance, I'm getting it." I didn't see that. We actually drove by somebody's house today and I was like, "I wonder if they'll be in church today?" Amy was like, "They were there last month." We were being honest because there are people that are like, "Christmas was a big time for me..." This isn't about you.

At our church, we are uninterested in growth; we are prioritizing health. We want to be healthy. We want you to be healthy. And you need to gather with God's people. Do you remember how sad... I'll just say it, how pathetic March and April of 2020 was. We had pictures of church members taped to these seats. It was like I was preaching to the Muppet Show. It was horrible. It was absolutely horrible. I broke down up here. People were texting me going, "Are you okay. Are you going to make it out of..." I'm like, "I don't know!" It's because we long to see one another face to face. We wanted to be together. You need this. If you're an every other weeker or once a monther, you need to plug in.

Some of you... We've got the Superbowl coming up. I just want to encourage you because I've heard from some that are really fired up. They'll say, "There's no place for that in a worship service." This is why we're using the term gatherings. Because when we gather as a church, we fulfill all five purposes. And it's okay for us to get together and have fun. There's a line you can cross, we know that. You can do too much, we know that. But for us to get together and enjoy one another's fellowship... It's interesting to me how people are like, "That's for the youth group." We believe that the same principles you apply to the youth group at a student gathering at a church can apply to adults as well. I'll even argue adults could use a little bit of the student energy. Remember when you used to go to camp and you would come home and you're all fired up after camp, and then you would come back to your church and the pastor would go, "Don't lose that fire for the Lord." I'm like, "Make church more like camp. This place is boring."

Look at me. I'm getting all my Baptist frustrations out on the table right now. We're done with the potlucks, we're done with the boring. We're going to have a good time together and there's nothing wrong with that.

4. **We gather to serve one another.** Do you know why I love coming here on Sunday. Do you know why I enjoy all the fun elements that get thrown in from time to time. We laugh together and we hug and shake hands and all that. When you decide to fulfill this fourth purpose, serving the body of Christ, you're going to find yourself at the bedside of someone in the ICU. You're going to find yourself at the bedside of someone in hospice. You're going to be praying with a mom or dad who has a prodigal child. You're going to find yourself working with a couple in crisis, trying to save their marriage. Then you're going to find yourself working with a spouse who is trying to recover from divorce. We know how serious ministry is. We know how serving one another... And the more you serve, the more you'll see the serious side of ministry. If I just did this purpose and just serve, serve, serve, and didn't enjoy the fellowship of followers of Jesus with glad and sincere hearts, that is a recipe for not only drift but burnout. And I'm gone.

Do you see how these purposes work together. Ministry. After the great commandment to love the Lord you God, we love our neighbors as ourselves. Love your neighbor as yourself. We see this in verses in Acts 2: 43 – 45, speaking of the first church. **3 Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common.** There was probably something unique going on that day with all of those who took the pilgrimage to learn more about their new Christian faith. So, there was great need. Like, "This isn't where I'm from, but I'm here now and I need help." **45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.** Serving one another. For many, you gather, so you're part of fellowship each and every week here. You worship in the fellowship, and you worship outside, you study the Bible. This is one area of your health in the new year that may be missing. You saw the Sweet Spot was up there.

For those who think it's just making coffee, we want you to see today that ministry, this purpose, is more than programs. It's more than just a program that you put out there. It's serving one another and caring for one another.

This week, we were having a gathering on New Years Day at our house. We do Bingo at our house when guests come over, with gift cards and stuff because we are pretty big party animals. I always want to make the Catholics feel welcome. And anybody from the Lion's club. Amy sends me out with nine balloons in this pocket that she wanted me to have helium placed in and to get ten gift cards. You know you go get gift cards now and I got all varieties, but it says like 10 to 500 dollars. I walked up to the counter. The place was empty. I walked up with these gift cards and the guy across the counter hung his head and sighed. This is the joy we have now with almost all customer service. I had gotten to the point where I pulled out my balloons, "And I need helium in all nine of those balloons." I left the balloons in my pocket and said, "I'll be blowing these up with my own air.

The reason we say ministry is more than programs is because when you start serving people and you get into the world. Some of you are really missing it, you really are, because when the gathering of the saints and the churches is all about you and it's all about what you need and what you want, you're not fulfilling this beautiful thing we have in the church where we rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. When you're celebrating, I'm celebrating with you. When I'm celebrating, you're celebrating with me. When I'm mourning, you're mourning with me. When you are mourning, I'm mourning with you. Who wants to be in a family where relationships are just one way? And when you serve, hopefully, here and your heart grows for people, now when you go out to a restaurant or to

the store that I went to get gift cards and someone is serving you, your mindset is completely different. You are not just serving me. How, in the midst of this transaction, can I serve you? How can I care for you? Ministry is more than programs. And the more you serve, the more you're going to see the serious side of ministry. And you're going to need all the other purposes.

**5. Evangelism.** We gather to share the good news of Jesus. Matthew 28: 19, ***Go and make disciples of all nations.*** Yes, we put it out there on social media, "Invite your friends to all that God is doing here at our church." And investing in relationships and the invite strategy is a great strategy, but, again, it's not enough. This is one I know many are missing, including myself. It's not just serving another person, but it's serving another person and then that opportunity presents itself for me to share the good news of Jesus. Acts 2: 47 – They fulfilled all of these purposes as a church, pursuing health not growth. ***God grew the church. Praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.***

So, we don't sit around and figure out how to get more baptisms next year, we sit around and figure out how we can be healthy. How can I be healthy in my life, fulfilling these five purposes on a daily basis? How can you be healthy fulfilling these five purposes on a daily basis? And then, when we gather as a church, it's all five purposes. But know this. **Evangelism is more than altar calls.** There are many ways that people let us know of their decision to follow Christ at this church. From the prayer team that will be down from after this gathering to people stopping by the welcome desk to people emailing us. There are many ways that people here let us know of placing their faith in Jesus.

I had a great conversation this week with Jared Kolter. He's our student and young adult pastor. I love that guy. I love what he does for our church. And talk about balance, he has it. I am grateful that God brought him to us. We had this great conversation about the young adults. I'll be honest with you. Right now, I'm fitting more into... If I were to pick a gathering to attend at Woodland Hills, it would probably be the 8:15. I'm starting to fit more with the old people. I've become the old guy at wood land hills. I'm the one telling them we need more Christ Tomlin. I'm the one now telling Katie, "I didn't really like that song." And I have to be reminded of what Francis Chan said. "That's okay, Ted, the song wasn't about you."

But the older you get, the more set in your ways. So, I want to know the young adults of our church as we hand the keys over, as we hand leadership over. Jared was talked to me about fluid membership. A lot of young adults today want to be a part of a ministry here at this church and then on another day, go over and be a part over there. And then be a part over there. They're not really committing or investing in a local church. To be honest with you, it's a lot like relationships. They don't necessarily want to define the relationship. I just want to encourage you that if joining a local church means nothing to you and gathering for these five purposes with a local church, I just want to encourage you. Being a part of the Big C church... This is what they would say, "I'm part of Big C church. I don't need a local church." Being part of a Big C church should not diminish your participation in a local church. Plug in. Serve. Actually, joining a local church sets us up better to serve the Big C Church. If you are student gathering with us today and you're like, "Well, I'm just here for seven, eight, nine months of the year and then I'm going to be back home," I love what Jared says. Be all there when you are there and be all here when you are here. Serve. Learn the value of commitment and what God is doing through the local church.

Speaking of Big C church, It's why I love... I heard this quote years ago from a pastor. "There's nothing like the local church when the local church is working right."

I've always interpreted that to mean when the local church understands these five purposes and budgets for them and lives them out in gatherings and daily walk, that's where the health comes from.

Speaking of Big C church, I want to let you know of something you did last year that many of you don't even know about. In Hyderabad, India, there is a church called ENHAK KORE Baptist Church. Your giving, your generosity, helped build this building, helped build this church for them. What I love about Big C church is about 11 hours ago, this church gathered. This church gathered brothers and sisters in Christ, together to worship Jesus, to learn about Jesus, to enjoy fellowship and eating together with glad and sincere hearts. This is their christmas outside venue where they fed 700 people.

There is probably not a person in here that will ever travel to this church, but this church is part of our church. These are brothers and sisters in Christ that we get to be a part of. And last year, you gave over \$600,000.00 to missions. Throughout the community and throughout the world... To me, this is what we should be celebrating. That we are part of the Bic C church. But I want to encourage each and every one of you to really think hard about what local church, what a gathering means, what these purposes mean every time we get together, and then what they mean for you every time you leave this campus. I'll I put the purposes up again. You might want to take a picture of it. Maybe this is something you haven't thought through in your 2024 plan. But where are you doing well and where do we need to step up? Where's your focus and where might you be lagging? And say, "I want to be healthy, and I feel disconnected from God. I feel maybe in drift." Where are you at in all five of these?

Father, I thank you for what you continue to do at our church just with Starting Point coming up again in the next couple of months, just the hundreds of people that will say "Yes, I want to be a part of what God is doing in the local church." We can celebrate this here as well as celebrate it with First United Methodist and First Baptist, and New Beginnings, and Bloom, and churches around the community that you're using that are living out these purposes. I'm grateful for all that you continue to do here. Keep us heathy. Keep us focused on health in these purposes.

For the individual right now, who has been focused on one or two or maybe three to the neglect of the others, that they would see this as part of their daily walk with Christ.

I pray for the one who has never placed faith in Jesus that today would be the day of their salvation and not leave this place before meeting with someone from our prayer team to let them know of the decision they made to confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in the hearts that he has been raised from the dead.

We pray all of this in the authority of the name of Jesus. And everyone agreed and said... Amen.