

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Pitch A Tent

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Every year the President of the United States delivers a state of the union address to a joint session of Congress. We had the idea many years ago given our proximity, why not do a state of the church. And so we do not position our campus pastors behind me. You don't have to stand and applaud every two minutes. And I might add, to my knowledge, no one has ever torn up my State of the church sermon. And we all shake hands. Too soon?

I have a feeling that this will be a little bit less contentious than the state of the church. And I want to say on that note; we are here for such a time as this. We are here for such a place as this. And we need to do what Scripture says we need to pray for our elected officials, pray for our appointed judges pray for this election cycle, grateful for our democracy.

I might just remind us that we have dual citizenship in this thing called the kingdom of God. And we are appointed ambassadors from that kingdom to this country to this city to the communities that we serve. Now, I wish we had diplomatic immunity because whoever is giving out parking tickets the last few months is doing an amazing job. I just feel a little targeted but I digress.

Okay. Welcome to National Community Church all seven campuses, Barracks Row, Gainesville, Kingstown, Ballston, Potomac Yard, Lincoln Theater and Capitol Hill. Shout out to our extended family online. You should have received on the way in annual report looks a little like this. You can actually find it online NCC.re/now. And really, we call it an annual report this is a praise report. Look what the Lord has done.

So I want to take a few minutes, share a few highlights I think you celebrate what you want to see more of but let me frame this first. In 2019 our team our staff engaged in a StratOps process. It began with a SWOT analysis. Many of you are familiar with this strengths and weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. StratOps is about assessing where you are, where you want to get and then how you're going to get there. Now, the net result is something called a WIN wheel, and WIN stands for **W**hat's **I**mportant **N**ow. As a part of that process, we identified lead measures and lag measures and I'll define the difference.

A lag measure is an outcome, if you're in business, its quarterly earnings and customer satisfaction. If you're in education might be enrollment, if you're in politics, it's pulling numbers. If lag measures are outcomes, then lead measures are inputs. It's the daily habits, the best practices, the action items that are going to produce the lag measures that you want.

Right now, in my Bible reading plan, I'm reading through the book of Acts, but I'm not just reading it. I'm reverse engineering it. Why? Because I want an outpouring like that in my life. Because I want this church to have that kind of impact. So what I'm doing is I'm reading through the book of Acts. And I'm actually writing lag measure and lead measure in the margins. And I'll give you an easy example. On the day of Pentecost God pours out his Spirit, church, his birthed, 3000 people baptized in a single day. That's an unbelievable lag measure. Question is, how did that happen? Well, if I remember right, about 120 believers went up into an Upper Room in Jerusalem, and they prayed for 10 days. Now listen, you cannot plan Pentecost. But if you seek God for 10 days, if you seek God with that kind of consistency, that kind of intentionality that kind of priority, listen, Pentecost is going to happen sooner or later.

You can call me a simpleton but I have a couple of very basic convictions. If we do what they did in the Bible, God's going to do what he did. And if we keep doing the right thing day in and day out, God is going to show up and show off his grace, his goodness, his power. And so here's the bottom line. I believe that God is calling us individually and corporately as a church to seek Him with greater consistency, with greater intentionality, with greater priority. That is our lead measure. It's the solution to 1000 problems. It's a catalyst for everything that we want to see happen as a church.

Now I'll spell this out a little bit more next weekend as we begin a new series called 'The Jesus Way'. I believe that we need to leverage Lent. And that it needs to be a season of seeking God. And we'll talk a little bit about that this weekend. We've got mission trips to take. We've got churches to plant; we've got buildings to build. If we seek God, if we seek God first, all these things are going to be added unto us

So I want to take a few minutes, share a few lag measures, you can pop open that annual report, and here we go. We have a core conviction. God is going to bless us in proportion to how we give to missions and care for the poor in our city. If we are doing the things that are near and dear to the heart of God, I am not worried about our bottom line. Why? Because that is the bottom line.

19 years ago, we took our first mission trip as a church; we couldn't field an entire team. So we tag team with another church and since then we have taken 273 trips. Now, I think in my math is right I think that adds up to 273 and a half, which is awesome. Last year, 185 NCC'ers invested their time, talent and treasure, 21 teams' 21 trips all around the world. 24 years ago, we made our first investment in missions, and it wasn't much \$50 check but we weren't even self-supporting as a church. But we took a step of faith and God has honored it. Last year 2019 we would have topped \$20 million given to kingdom causes. And we are just getting started. Now, I want you to hear the heartbeat here. We want to grow more, so we can give more.

Now, on a local level help set up 87 apartments for refugees. On Wednesday nights we turned Ebenezers Coffeehouse into the living room served 2000 meals to our friends experiencing homelessness. And I love this, an NCC'er used to live on the streets flipped the blessing with an initiative called 'Sleep Warm Tonight' gave away 1000 sleeping bags. Why? Because he has friends who have died of hypothermia.

This is not just 1000 sleeping bags; it's not just 300 long johns. Make no mistake this is a microcosm of Matthew 25.

In 2017 we launched one of our expressions, the DC Dream Center last year, again, just a thin slice, 154 Thanksgiving baskets. 350 people that we hosted for job interviews at a job fair mentored hundreds of kids in dozens of different ways added up 14,705 volunteer hours. That's almost two years of time donated to a place that is turning hope into a habit.

Now last week, we kicked off our spring semester a small group so grateful for our small group leaders. As we grow larger and larger as a church we want to grow smaller and smaller. How? Well in 2019 we offered 440 small groups. And I love this 211 people threw down the welcome mat, said come on why don't you meet at my house. 77 people completed the alpha course, 193 freshmen of the city. You know entering a new stage of life in a new place and what we're saying is, let us mentor you. I think our mentors are some of the unsung heroes of this church.

Last year, our prayer team 264 inner healing prayer appointments, we are brokering hope one prayer at a time. Last weekend, 15 NCC'ers went public with their faith via baptism, 778 baptisms in the last 10 years. Awesome. This is fun. Our podcasts reached 188 countries. This is our extended family.

Now speaking of family, we dedicated 41 babies. We're gonna grow this church one way or the other. You keep doing what you're doing, alright.

We had 247 families register as first time guests. We have 143 youth on our winter retreat right now. God, would you speak to them? Would you anoint them? Would you give revelation? Would you deliver where it's needed? It is hard growing up right now, right here and I'm so grateful. 150 youth being disciplined by 36 small group leaders. And then I'll just throw this in we had 112 couples 224 people at our very first dinner date night a week ago, largest double date ever. And it's wonderful to have a place for those kinds of corporate gatherings.

And on that note, let me just say that one year ago, we were building out our Capitol Hill campus and thanks your generosity we did it debt free. About to embark on phase two so we're building out that kid's ministry space as well as a child development center. 193 people participated in that 'Yes and Amen' campaign. I'm just gonna say thanks again. And if you're new to NCC if you want to be a shareholder in that vision NCC.re/vision.

A couple of quick hitters and then we're going to switch gears. This week two of our expressions DC Dream Center Miracle Theater are going to host the screening of the film 'The Best of Enemies' and we're going to host a conversation around racial reconciliation. This month, several films celebrating Black History Month including Harriet, and if we don't lead the way, who will? The church ought to be the most diverse place on the planet.

Finally, February 26 we're going to record a live album. This is amazing, its Ash Wednesday great way to kick off Lent. In the last decade NCC worship has written 146 songs. So grateful for our worship leaders, our worship teams, and I think these are some of the most anointed songs and so we're going to throw down some worship. And then what's beautiful is then these songs are a gift to the kingdom at large. By the way, few weeks ago, four people healed during worship in one of our services at one of our campuses. Do it again, Lord. Do it again. I'm gonna stop there.

Every weekend it's a minor miracle it takes about 500 volunteers to pull off our seven campuses and so thanks for not just going to church, thanks for being the church. And I better say this we don't have seven campuses, we have thousands of campuses NCC is wherever you go. And I know that these numbers can be a little overwhelming. You might even be tempted to think, do they need me? I want you to hear what I'm about to say. There never has been and never will be anyone like you. It's not a testament to you. It's a testament to the God who created you and the significance of that is this. No one can worship God like you or for you. No one can serve God like you or for you. You are a unique piece of this puzzle called National Community Church. And we want to help you find your people, find your place, find your purpose and when we all step up and step in, his kingdom is gonna come, His will is going to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Can we praise God one more time for everything that he's doing? You know, whatever you don't turn into praise turns into pride. So this is an important exercise for us to acknowledge this is his church. And he's the one who did it. He does it through us. He does it through ordinary people, but he gets the glory.

Alright, we're going to switch gears and I've shared a lot of lag measures right there. Let me switch gears and talk a little bit about lead measures. On the occasion of my most recent birthday, my wife gave me a gift that I am wearing on my ring finger. It looks like an ordinary ring this is no ordinary ring. There are infrared sensors in this ring that measure heart rate and body temperature and respiration rate. There's a gyroscope that measures movement gives me metrics on sleep cycles, including deep sleep, which is critical when it comes to storing memory and repairing muscle. And this ring introduced me to vital signs that I did not know, were important. I had no idea that heart rate variability is a key indicator in rest, and recover. I think what I'm trying to say is my wife loves me. What can I say? But let me also say this every day, I get a readiness score. And it's a combination of all of these vital signs. And they're internal, they're invisible yet they are incredibly important.

The most important things are the hardest things to measure. How do you measure love? How do you measure faith? How do you measure humility? How do you measure joy unspeakable and peace that passes understanding? How do you measure the anointing of God or the favor of God? How do you measure spiritual hunger? How do you measure the fear of God that with the sense of awe that accompanies it, how do you measure holy confidence? These are the spiritual vital signs that matter the most, yet these are the hardest things to measure. To what degree are you resting in God's grace? To what degree are you trusting God's timing? To what degree are you enjoying God's presence? It's a

combination of those vital signs that give us our spiritual readiness score readiness for revival, readiness for breakthrough, readiness for miracles, readiness for a move of God in our lives.

Now I wish I had a ring to give to each one of you wouldn't that be amazing? I do not. But I do have a text. And you can turn all the way back to the book of Exodus; I'm going to go old school this weekend. Exodus 33, verse seven, we'll put it up on the screen. Here we go.

"Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp, and he called it the Tent of Meeting. And everyone who sought the Lord would go out to the Tent of Meeting which was outside the camp."

Now, I kind of love it. I have a T shirt that says the Department of Redundancy Department. And so twice it says outside the camp even says far off. The question is how far? Well according to one rabbinic interpretation, the distance was 2000 cubits. And I think it's a good guess for two reasons. One, this is the distance that God said to keep between for the Israelites to keep between themselves and the Ark of the Covenant. And then two this was the maximum walking distance allowed on the Sabbath. And so you crunch the numbers and 2000 cubits translates to .596 miles. Stick with me. It's close enough to see. So it's not out of sight out of mind. But it's far enough to be free of interruption, to be free of distraction, to be a free of the white noise that was happening in the camp. This is the way that Moses got off the grid. This is the way Moses sought God with consistency, intentionality, and priority.

For the past three decades and acoustic ecologist named Gordon Hempton has compiled what he calls the list of the last great quiet places. I write a little bit about this in 'Whisper'. That list consists of places with at least 15 minutes of uninterrupted quiet during daylight hours. At last count, there were 12 quiet places in the entire United States and Washington DC is not one of them. It's getting harder and harder to get off the grid. It's getting harder and harder to breathe; Maroon Five.

A few things are harder than putting Psalm 51 in practice, "Be still and know that I am God." I love technology. I mean, we are podcasting all around the world. And somehow God is using that to impact people's lives. But it's a blessing and a curse. We FaceTime our kids, we Facebook our friends, which is great but it also means that almost anyone can contact us at almost any time, for any reason. And if we aren't careful, we get addicted to that little hit of dopamine. And the next thing we know we're spending 142 minutes on social media every single day and that's the average person. Some of you are above average. So we're spending two hours and 20 minutes on social media. We aren't giving God the time of day and then we wonder where God went.

I love you but this is where I push the envelope a little bit. You'll never find time you know this. You have to make time. You will not find time. It will not mirac... Yes, God can make the sun standstill. But you are not going to find time you have to make time. Let me stop right here, just saying because this is usually where the guilt trip begins. Right?

Can I tell you what I did? After writing 'The Circle Maker' I did a little book tour and I often would open those events with a question and the question was this. How many of you feel like you're praying too much? Nary a hand I don't think a single person raised their hand. What I was trying to do is just let's level the playing field. Okay. This isn't about punching a time card. This isn't about doing our time. This is buying what the Psalmist is selling. What do you mean? Better is one day in the courts of the Lord than 1000 elsewhere?

Now here's the bottom line Moses pitch the tent outside the camp, could I be so bold as to suggest that every single one of us needs a Tent of Meeting? We need a time. We need a place where we meet with God in Scripture, in prayer, and fasting and meditation, in silence in solitude. This is our readiness score for whatever God wants to do. Now, this is where Moses met God, right? This is where Moses became intimately acquainted with God. Now, you know, I choose different versions of the Bible to read through different years, and I'm reading through The Amplified and it's a little longer, but I found it to be worth it. And this is a good example, when it talks about Moses getting to know God, here's what it says. Moses says; show me now your way that I may know you. The Amplified adds this little explanation to know God is to progressively become more deeply and intimately acquainted with God, perceiving and recognizing and understanding more strongly and clearly. All I know is this that when Moses walked out of that Tent of Meeting, his readiness score was off the chart. Why? Because he got off the grid because he got in sync with the Holy Spirit.

In 10 days, we begin a liturgical season called Lent. I didn't grow up practicing Lent, I didn't even know. I was in seminary when one Ash Wednesday, I saw someone was something on their forehead. I was like, did you not look in the mirror today? I had no idea that some people would practice Ash Wednesday this way. That's how naive I was. But you know what I've learned to leverage Lent as a season of spiritual growth. It starts with Ash Wednesday, it runs through Easter Sunday. I'm going to spell this out a little bit more next weekend. But I want to set us up what what if we set up a Tent of Meeting and spent time with God every day. Listen it could be five minutes if that's where you need to start. If you're able to invest an hour I think it'll pay some dividends. I believe that that's what the Lord's calling us to.

Verse 11. "Inside the Tent of Meeting, the Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Afterward Moses would return to the camp, but the young man who assisted him Joshua, son of Nun, would not depart from the tent."

Question, why did God choose Joshua to succeed Moses? Why did God choose Joshua to lead the people into the Promised Land? If you're taking notes, just write this down. The more time we spend with God, the more you can trust us. That's so simple. But it's true. There are no shortcuts. There are no cheat codes more time equals more trust. Why? Because we become more intimately acquainted with the Father's heart.

When I was a senior in college, I read this verse, changed my life. There is not a verse in all of Scripture that had that kind of impact me during those college years. I was a senior in college, I didn't know what to do, where to go. And I don't remember the circumstance but one day I read this verse, I said, I want to be Joshua. So I made a decision that I would turn our chapel we had a chapel on campus that I would turn it into my Tent of Meeting. And so every day over lunch, it was usually me and the janitor, the lights were off, and I would sneak up to the balcony, and I would pace and pray in that balcony. Now, was it always revival? No. Sometimes it just felt like a long walk. But at least I got my steps in right. That balcony is where I learned to seek God. It's where I learned to listen. It's where I learned to contend in prayer. It's where I learned to worship without lyrics. It's where I learned to discern his spirit.

And something happened in that balcony one day. There was a pastor who made an offer said I want you to come work for me and happen to be my favorite preacher. I mean, this was like the golden ticket. And I was I was pretty excited because you know when someone wants you. And so I remember going up to the balcony, and I better at least pray about it. I thought it'd be an easy answer. And wouldn't you know it? There was a check in my spirit. It was like the Holy Spirit gave me a red light. And it was so hard saying no, because we didn't have any other offers, and so I didn't know what else to do. So I did what you do when you don't know what to do. I went to graduate school. Less than a year later, that pastor had to resign because of a long history of sexual indiscretion. Listen, Lora and I would have weathered that. We would have come out the other side it would have been fine, but I think the Holy Spirit was cutting us off at the pass.

Now when my readiness score is right, I'm practicing daily spiritual disciplines. I think it starts with Scripture. And it's not just reading the Bible it's the Bible reading me. You get into the word and eventually it starts reading your mail, it starts eating your lunch. Now I have a Bible reading plan that's going to get me through scripture this year. But it's not about getting through Scripture it's about getting scripture through us like a French press. Where the word gets into us, and his promises get from our head to our heart, to our gut. They begin to be the gut instincts that drive us.

Why am I so passionate about this? I'll tell you why because pastors have spiritual slumps, just like everybody else. Six months ago, I was stressed. I wasn't practicing my daily disciplines the way that I could, or should and about three months ago it was just like I gotta get back to basics. So I did and I started seeking God with a greater consistency and intentionality and priority and it's hard to describe but I'm different than I was three months ago.

Last week, Dick Foth quoted Henri Nouwen. I love his writing a read his memoir. Let me tell you a story about Henri Nouwen he wants checked himself into a Trappist monastery for seven months. Why? He had done so much lecturing on prayer that he didn't have time to pray. And he said this; I'll put it on the screen. "I started to see how much I had fallen in love with my own compulsions and illusions, and how much I needed to step back and wonder." "Is there a quiet stream on underneath the fluctuating

affirmations and rejections of my little world? Is there a still point where my life is anchored to and from which I can reach out with hope and courage and confidence?"

Let me ask a couple of questions. Where do you meet with God? And when do you meet with God? We're gonna go way back to basics. If we set up an appointment with each other, let's just say I said, Where, where do you want to meet? And you said, wherever. When do you want to meet? Whenever. Well, I appreciate your flexibility. That meeting isn't going to happen is it? Not without a designated time or place. We miss so many meetings with God.

Now next week, I'm going to talk a little bit about how God often moves outside the structures and systems that he sets up. I know that sounds counterintuitive. It'll make more sense next week. But that doesn't mean you can't have systems or structures. You've got to have a time and a place where you meet with God. Now, here's the reality, most of us can't check ourselves into a Trappist monastery for seven months. So how do we do this? Well, let me take a page out of that monastery book. There's a medieval practice called the daily office. It's liturgy of hours, divides the day into canonical hours, observed in monasteries and you've heard there are seven protons but you've heard a few of these. Their morning vigils and evening Vespers those might ring a bell. Now that monastic practice of praying seven to eight times a day traces its origins to King David Psalm 119:164. It says seven times a day do I pray to you? Now if you can pull that off more power to you. I'm not sure that you're setting yourself up for success. You would almost need to check into the monastery to follow the rhythm that they have and have people to hold you accountable.

I think Daniel, a little more doable. He would turn his upstairs bedroom into a prayer closet. It says that he would kneel and face Jerusalem and he would pray three times a day. All indications are that this was his regular routine. Now I realize that even praying three times a day sounds otherworldly, right? If you have fussy children and leaky faucets and bills to pay, are you kidding me? Listen, I think once a day is a good place to start. Start the day with prayer. If you're feeling ambitious, end the day in prayer.

Next week, our discipleship team will share a digital resource that during Lent can help us a little prompt every day to begin to practice this daily office. According to rabbinic tradition David hung his harp above his bed by an open window. Why would he do that? It was an ancient alarm clock. When the north wind started blowing in that window, it would catch the strings, and it would wake him up. And David would get up and he would study Torah, until the break of dawn.

Psalm 57:8, *"Awake, my glory (my inner self); awake, harp and lyre! I will awake right early [I will awaken the dawn]!"*

Psalm 63:1 *"Early will I seek thee."*

Now, I'm treading very carefully because Oswald Chambers said, let God be as original with others as he was with you. I'm not saying go find a chapel, go up to the balcony and pray back and forth. You got to figure out what works for you. You've got to figure out your win and you're ware. I just felt like I want to give us 10 days to just say, let's leverage Lent. I'm not worried about vision. I'm worried about seeking God. And if we seek God everything else is going to take care of itself.

Now the oldest English proverb traces back to the 12th century, almost done. 'You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink.' This is familiar, yes. But have you ever heard this part? 'You can salt its oats.' All I'm doing this weekend is salting our oats. When I look back at critical moments in my journey in our journey as a church, it's the stirrings it's the promptings. It's a prompting to walk into a movie theater at Union Station and ask the manager would you ever consider letting a church meet here. 13 years God blessed us with an unbelievable place to begin our journey as a church. Its prompting to pray a 4.7 mile perimeter around Capitol Hill, a prompting to pray circles around a crack house that is now Ebenezer Coffeeshouse, a prompting to give our first \$50 check before we were even self supporting.

How do you get those promptings? You pitch a tent outside the camp. You find a time, you make time, you find a place, you make a place where the Holy Spirit can stir you and prompt you and convict you and check you and quicken you. What would happen if all of us, all of our campuses sought God personally and collectively, during Lent? What would happen if we saw God with a little bit more consistency and intentionality and priority? Our lag measures would be off the chart. You cannot plan Pentecost but you can pitch a tent like Moses. You can climb the stairs like Daniel and kneel next to your bed. You can hang a harp like David. And you can tarry for 10 days like the disciples. If we keep doing the right things day in and day out, God is going to show up and show off. The only ceiling on what God can do is daily spiritual disciplines The only ceiling, on your intimacy with God and our impact on the world, is daily spiritual disciplines.

May his kingdom come, may his will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus name Amen.