

SECTION 1

WELCOME TO CHURCH

I was born in the church. I was raised in the church.

I have seen its faults and failures – as any living and breathing organization led by humans is bound to have. Yet, I have discovered the power in belonging to a life-giving community. I have experienced the wounds, but I have also found deep healing.

With all its shortcomings, I have come to realize there is nothing on earth like the local church. When the church full of the Holy Spirit moves into a city, carrying with her the person and the message of Jesus, reconciliation abounds, renewal is born, and the harvest is ripe for the revival of the human soul.

I believe in the church. I believe the local church is the hope for the world.

In all my years in the church, I have wrestled for clarity, fought cynicism, as well as questioned methods and injustices, but I have yet to find any rival to the church in human society today or throughout history. I wasn't simply raised in the church. Rather, I was and am still being raised in the church. I was raised by strangers who became family. I was taught the Scriptures by faithful members who spoke words of life into me. I was challenged by sound teaching from the platform and from across the table. I have been encouraged, admonished, equipped and, above all, blessed by men and women whose names will never be celebrated by popular culture. Yet, it was their faithfulness that shaped me into who I am and who I am becoming today.

My hope does not rest in the church's unreached potential. My hope is anchored in the promise that between now and eternity, the church is the only thing that Christ Jesus Himself is building, and if this is what He is building, then this is what we must give our lives to.

“I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Matthew 16:18b-19

Jesus is building His church. Jesus is the architect, the cornerstone, the builder, the financier, and the finisher of the church. You may be asking, "Is this in the end all about the church?" No. The church in history, the church globally and the church locally is now and always not about herself but about Jesus. This church is about Jesus and His Kingdom.

The central message of Jesus was not to create a non-profit organization. His message was not to create individual followers of Him who exist autonomously. His message was not that He came to give people their one-way ticket to heaven. The central message of Jesus was the arrival of His Kingdom on earth.

"From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' ...And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people."

Matthew 4:17; 23

"Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.'"

Mark 1:14b-15

"but he said to them, 'I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.'"

Luke 4:43

The Kingdom of God is the greatest treasure to enter the human story. The Kingdom of God is the rule and reign of God and carries within itself the power to transform each person into the likeness of Christ - redeeming their ravaged soul into the image for which they were created. The Kingdom of God - in its message and its implementation - heals the sick, cares for the poor, loves the marginalized, brings justice to the hurting and reconciles sinful and broken humans back to their Creator God. The way God chose His Kingdom to be advanced was in and through the local church.

That is why I hope in the church and believe the church is the hope for the world - because Jesus chose the church to be His plan of redemption for the world. This is God's plan - His only plan.

What then is the church? The church is the embassy of the Kingdom of God on earth. We do not function under our own authority, and we are most certainly not advancing our own agenda or kingdoms. The church has always been and continues to be the manifest presence of heaven on earth. As a result, we live under the authority of Christ and live to make

His Kingdom known in our lives, families, neighborhoods, and city. The church is:

- The authority on earth instituted by Jesus to give shape and affirm the lives of God's people.
- The influence in society to bring the comprehensive rule of heaven into every sphere of life and culture.
- The embodiment of the ministry of Jesus to make disciples of all nations until His return.

If this is what the church is, the next question to ask is, "Who is the church?" The church is those who gather as the disciples of Jesus. For too long in the modern west, we have used the church (primarily the gathering on Sunday morning) as the evangelistic tool to reach an unbelieving world. In other words, we have created worship experiences and services that convinced Christians that the church exists to reach "lost people" by executing well-curated experiences on Sunday morning that won't offend unbelievers but instead draw them into becoming a follower of Jesus. Inevitably, we have turned the gathering of God's people into a crowd to be entertained, managed and mobilized.

This is not who the church is. If this is true then, friends, the church in the most persecuted places of the world are failing because they do not live in societies where they are free to invite their unbelieving friends to church on Sunday for the pastor and the paid staff to put them in programs that will produce followers of Jesus.

While we acknowledge that we live in a context where we are free to invite anyone to gather in the church, the church is now and will always be the gathering of God's people who are growing together as followers of Jesus. The church is:

- The local, global, and historical expression of God's people.
- The fellowship of believers shaped through biblical practices.
- The intentional effort of disciples to become an inter-ethnic and inter-generational Christ worshipping people.

This is the church. We are the church.

To my church family - I love Jesus with all my heart. I love our pastors, staff and leaders that God has brought together, and I love you. I love who God is calling us to be and I love who He is shaping us to become - a people who collectively seek to love God, love one another and our neighbors, and make disciples of all nations.

As we move together as "Citizens and saints and members in the household

of God”, I want you to know that you matter. Your story matters. You belong here. You belong because those who belong to Jesus belong to those who belong to Jesus.

I pray that we collectively move closer to the unity of the Spirit – working tirelessly to spread far and wide the Kingdom of God. I pray that we choose daily to love one another in a way that makes the unbelieving world around us curious. I pray we live in the humility and truth of Christ Jesus. I pray the city is different because we are here. I pray that as we grow in what it means to be “Made Alive in Christ”, we experience the power and the presence of Christ Jesus here and now. Finally, I pray we walk in the love of God the Father, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

In Christ,

Nirup Alphonse