

COMMUNITY LIFE Transcript

By Dr. Ron Jones

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I'm reading this morning from Acts 2 beginning in verse 42. It says of the early church that, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

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Well, that passage of scripture I just read, Acts 2:42-47, is probably the clearest and most concise glimpse we have into the early church 2000 years ago. You can lay alongside Acts 2:42-47 Acts 4:32-37. And these two passages of scripture, again, provide us the best glimpse we have into the activities of the early church. Now, there are a lot of people today, and especially a lot of young people today, saying, you know, "We need to get back to Acts 2. We need to be an Acts 2 kind of church." And I couldn't agree more. These passages of scripture give us some sense of how it all began. And from this many Bible teachers and theologians derive from Acts 2:42-47 what we might call the five purposes of the church. You know, the mission of the church is not up for discussion. Jesus gave us the mission of the church. It's a Great Commission mission. He told His disciples, "Go therefore into all the world and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." And then He left them with this promise. He says, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." And we've taken that Great Commission mission, as it were, and we language it this way at Shores. That our mission is to glorify God by making disciples of Jesus Christ who go and make disciples. Every mission of the church should sound like the Great Commission.

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Well, likewise, the purposes of the church are not up for discussion. They are self-evidence in how we see the early church operating 2000 years ago. And from these five purposes that I'm going to share with you this morning, we derive as a church our strategy. Not just what we do and why we do it in our mission, but how we do church. And our goal is to be as biblical as possible to align to what we see in scripture. So with that in mind, I want us to dive into Acts 2:42-47. It's always good to kind of have a refresher as to the purpose of the church and why we're here. This is a little bit of insider language this morning. If you're visiting with us, we're glad you're here. If you're not sure about this thing called Christianity and, you know, you're still investigating Jesus and the gospel and all of that, we're glad you're here, too. But this part of our study of the book of Acts brings us to a passage that lends us to a little bit of insider conversation about who are as a church, why we exist, and what our strategy is to carry out the mission that God has given to us.

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With that in mind, here is the first purpose of the church that's self-evident from this glimpse we have of the early church, and I would just describe it as worship. We find the church gathering to encounter God. And I want you to look at verse 44. It says, "And all who believed were together," and verse 46, "And day by day attending the temple together and breaking bread in the homes." They were together. And this was before the days of technology where, you know, supposedly we can be together in cyberspace. There was no Facebook here where they connected. No, this is face to face togetherness.

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Part of what we see as a glimpse of the early church here is the early church in community, experiencing authentic biblical community, the kind of community that brought them together in face to face kinds of relationships. Now, I'm all for the technology of today, but this is the generation that is the most connected technologically than any other previous generation. But we are the generation that least experiences authentic biblical community. And, oh, the irony of that. Mark Zuckerberg would like to us to believe that Facebook is going to replace the church and what little league has done over the last, you know, however many decades and centuries. But not so fast, Mr. Zuckerberg. What the church does in coming together, gathering together in face to face encounters, can never be replaced by technology, no matter how much we love the use of modern technology today.

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There is the church gathered and the church scattered. And there needs to be a time—we call it a time of worship on Sunday—where the church comes together and we gather. But notice the early church, they gathered in the temple, and they gathered by breaking bread in their homes. Why do we encourage you to be in worship on Sunday, the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, gathered as a body of believers, gathered as the bride of Christ, and then also get connected in a life group? Did we just come up with this, you know, as a 21st century way of doing church? No, it goes all the way back to the 1st century. They gathered in the temple, and they gathered from house to house. And so we say gather for worship. Make that a priority in your week. Be here on Sunday to be the church gathered. And then get connected in a life group. As we grow larger as a church, we grow smaller at the same time. And notice, the early church did this day by day. This wasn't just a weekly thing that they did when they could fit it into their schedules. They were so taken by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it transformed everything they did. They said, "Because of the risen Christ, we've got to be together." And it was the demonstration of the church gathered in this place for worship.

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Verse 43 says, "Great awe some upon them." The fear of the Lord came upon them, "upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles." Now, I've been saying for a while as a pastor that our culture has changed. And, quite frankly, it's really hard to prioritize being in church on Sunday. I say that because our culture has changed from a generation ago when the church had the exclusive rights to Sunday morning. Businesses were not open. The Blue laws were in place. There was no kids' sports on Sunday morning. We had the exclusive rights to it. That has changed in our culture, and now everything is competing for our time seven days a week. There is nothing sacred in our culture about

gathering in church on Sunday, which means, as believers in Jesus Christ, we have to work extra hard to make it a priority in our lives.

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Hebrews 10:25 suggests it might have been a challenge even 2000 years ago, because the writer of Hebrews says, “Let us not forsake the assembling of ourselves together as the manner of some is, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day approaching.” Now, what day is he talking about? He’s talking about the day of the Lord, the second coming of Jesus Christ. He says that there is all the more reason to be together, gathered as a church, because we need to encourage one another as we see that day approaching. Well, friends, we’re 2000 years closer to the day of the Lord, the second coming of Jesus Christ, than the early church was. And given what’s going on in our world today and even in our own culture, there is even more reason for us as followers of Jesus to prioritize our times of worship and our times of gathering. And that’s my challenge to you today. Let’s not forsake the assembling of ourselves together. Let’s not allow other things to creep into that time that we prioritize in God’s house. You’re a believer in Jesus Christ. Be in God’s house on Sunday. If it’s not this house, be it another house, another house of worship that preaches the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Find someplace where you can regularly be in church, because your spiritual health and the health of that gathered body of believers depends on it. We need each other. We need to encourage one another. And even your presence and my presence here on a weekly basis does that.

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So that’s the first purpose of the church. We gather to worship. Secondly, we gather for discipleship. I say the church now grows to experience the fullness of Christ. Look at it in verse 42. It says, “And they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching. Part of what it means to make a disciple of Jesus Christ or to be His disciple, His fully devoted follower, is that a disciple is a learner. You’re under the teaching of God’s Word. And you’re in it for yourself. And certainly we do that when we gather for worship and we have a time of preaching, as we’re doing right now, the teaching of God’s Word. But it also happens in another environment we call life groups or small groups. We say life change happens best in the context of community and in the context of a smaller group. And again, this model is the way Jesus disciplined His own disciples. He had twelve of them. And He spent time with them in a small group. Oh, He had a ministry to a larger group known as the 70, and He had a ministry to the multitude, but Jesus modeled how this was to take place, how we train fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

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And we talk about how we have two environments here and a third one that I’ll toss in in a moment. But two main environments where this discipling takes place, where we challenge one another to grow up in our relationship with Jesus Christ. Peter says, “Grow in the grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Don’t be satisfied with spiritual infancy. You know, “Wah, wah, wah, drink my milk, drink my milk.” No, he says go from milk to meat and grow up in your relationship with Christ. And those of you who are more mature need to be discipling those who are new in the faith. This is how it’s supposed to work. And our two environments where that takes place are life groups—smaller context, more organic in the way we do that—and then what we call the Shores Bible Institute on Wednesday nights—more traditional classroom settings where teaching happens for the entire family at all ages.

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We've been talking about taking that even a step further. In fact, I'll give you a little insight. I'm working on a discipleship curriculum that I want to bring down to a one-on-one, maybe one-on-two kind of level. It's been my burden for quite some time when I talk to people in the church. And I say, "Listen, has anyone ever discipled you? You came to faith in Christ at such-and-such date. But did anybody, after that happened, sit down with you and, as kind of a starting point in your relationship with God, walk you through a disciple's first steps?" A vast majority of people in the church, that hasn't happened. And we've kind of dropped the ball on discipleship. So I'm writing a curriculum. It's a video-based curriculum where I do some teaching, write some study guides. You're going to be able to access it online. And the idea is for you to watch the videos—there are seven sessions—download the study guide notes, get into the Word. And then we want to connect you with a discipleship coach in our church family. That might be a staff member. It might be an elder, a deacon, a life group leader, somebody that you can schedule a coffee conversation with around that particular session's topic. We've got to get one-on-one. We've got to get one-on-two or three or four. Even smaller gatherings than what happens in a life group. And get about the business of disciples making disciples. You go through the curriculum, you'll receive a certificate of completion. But better than that, you will now be certified to be a discipleship coach. Okay? Remember, our goal is to make disciples of Jesus Christ who then go and make disciples. And we'll start with those more mature in their faith who can then offer themselves up as a discipleship coach. We want to get serious about this. Of not only fulfilling our mission, but also as a matter of strategy to disciple people.

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The third purpose of the church we just generally call ministry. I look inside the early church, and I see the church giving to serve God and others. Now, before I point you to the verse of scripture I have in mind here in Acts 2:42-47. We can talk about giving in three ways—the giving of your time, the giving of your talent, and the giving of your treasure. And that's not new to a lot of us. You know, time, talent and treasure. We read Acts 2:42-47, and we can assume the early church gave of their time. They gave of their talent. But what's emphasized in the text is the giving of their treasure.

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Listen to this in verse 45. "And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had need." Back up to verse 44. "And all who believed were together and had all things in common." Part of the reason we say this is a picture of biblical community is because when you're in community with others, you have some things in common. You do life together. And part of what they had in common was their possessions and their financial life. Now, it's important not to make a mistake here. Some people look at this and say, "Oh, here is justification for socialism and communism." No, no, no, no. You get a big F on your theological paper if you go there. And here's why. Socialism and communism are ways of redistributing wealth through the involuntary coercion of the government. Okay? We've got a segment of our society today that says, "Yea, socialism, yea." They haven't got a clue as to what they're talking about. You want the government coercing your possessions and then redistributing them? I don't.

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And, by the way, that's not what the early church was. What you have here to the contrary is the voluntary, spontaneous, contagious generosity of God's people. Generosity that was so taken up by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it transformed every aspect of their lives, even how they viewed their possession. And when they saw somebody in need, they said, "Listen, it isn't mine to begin with. It belongs to God. What can I do to help you?"

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Now, turn to chapter 4 and beginning in verse 32. Now we're ready for this second glimpse inside the early church. Look at it beginning in verse 32. It says, "Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common." Not communism, not socialism. This isn't involuntary government coercion. This is spontaneous, voluntary, contagious generosity. This is a group of people who have become so taken by the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the reality of the risen Christ that they move from an ownership mentality to a stewardship mentality. Hardest thing in the world to happen as you grow up in Jesus is to say, "This wallet of mine doesn't belong to me, it belongs to God."

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You know, I always tells couples that are about to get married and we have the financial conversation...I say, "Listen, you know, you're about to merge your lives, and you're about ready to become one flesh. You need to become one financially, too. You need to look at each other and say, 'What's mine is yours, and what's yours in mine, and what's ours is God's.'" "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it and all who live in it," Psalm 24:1 says. "The silver and gold belong to me," the Lord God Almighty says," Haggai 2. I can go on and on and on and on to establish how we are stewards of what God has entrusted to us.

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What I'm saying (0:19:00.0) to you is this. If you're relationship with Jesus Christ and your understanding of the resurrection of Jesus Christ has not impacted you to the point where you are now overflowing in voluntary, spontaneous, contagious generosity, something is missing in your relationship with God. You read on in the early church here. "With great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."

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And then there's an example. "Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the (0:20:00.1) apostles' feet." Yeah, Barnabas was Mr. Encouragement. Why? He encouraged people with his resources. Listen, if you have an ownership mentality, you're probably missing out on opportunities to be an encouragement to somebody out of the resources that God has entrusted to you. We are stewards, ladies and gentlemen, not owners. And part of the purpose of the church is to do ministry. To grow in the grace of giving, 1 Corinthians 9 says. How far have you grown in that?

In the last six years or the last six months or the last six weeks. Some of you haven't grown much.

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I'm going to get in your grill just a little bit, if you don't mind, all right. It's budget time at the church. I didn't plan this message because...I mean, we're just in a study of the book of Acts. But we're in that two-month cycle where we're evaluating the budget for next year and so forth, going to finance committee, all that kind of stuff with the elders. It just grieves my heart every time we go through this process and we say there's not enough. We are tight, tight, tight. And I know because of studies that I've read...and not much has changed over the years. The average church-going person today gives about 2.2 or 3% of his income to the church, far short of a tithe, which is 10% and what I believe is the starting point in our giving. The minimum expression of generosity found in the scriptures is a tithe. We are well below that on average in the church. Not just here, but across the country. Also when you compare what the IRS says the average American gives to charitable causes, it's around 2%, too. You know what that says? First of all, it tells me that most churches like ours are underfunded. And most church-going people who claim to be followers of Jesus are no more generous than the average pagan that never darkens the hall of the church.

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If that stings a little bit, okay. All right. Here's...and I'm in your grill right now. Here is for some of you, some of you who walk in here, and you never put anything in the offering plate. Or what you do relative to your income and what God has entrusted to you is nowhere close to a tithe, and it's time to step up. It's time to step up. We will never achieve the mission that God has given to us as a church continuing to underfund this local body of believers. We will continue to struggle. We will continue to be understaffed. We have a great staff of people, many of them doing the jobs of one and a half to two people. But if all of us did our part...we're not talking about equal gifts. We're talking about equal sacrifice. You say, "I'm not Barnabas. I don't have land to sell." I don't care. Wherever you are.

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Eighty percent of our giving, our business office tells me, comes from people 50 and above. Young families, hello. All right. And I've heard all the excuses. I've lived through all the seasons of excuses. You're not going to reach a time where you can afford to tithe. It's going to be a step of faith. Listen, I'm in my 50s. It's the most expensive time of Cathryn and I's marriage. We have two kids in college right now. But it's not an excuse to cut back on our giving or to stop giving. Because we decided a long time ago Jesus is going to be number one in our life. We decided a long time ago Jesus is alive, and this has to transform every area of my life, including my finances. We put Jesus number one. You can't say He's number one in your life, be first in your life, if He's last in your budget. You just can't do that, friends.

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And it's just time for us to have a little conversation here. Okay. Give me the freedom as your pastor to get in your grill a little bit and to bring to some level of awareness what's happening across the body of Christ, not in Atlantic Shores, but in churches all across America. We are wealthy. But it's a prioritizing decision in all of our lives as you steward those resources

before the Lord. And you'll never—just trust me on this—you'll never get to a point where you say, “Oh, now we're wealthy, and we have all this surplus.” God will make sure that it's always a step of faith. And you take that step of faith, and then watch Him grab hold of your economic plan. And you'll be amazed at what He does. If you can't trust Him with a tithe, He says, “Put Me to the test. And put Me to the test, and see if I won't open up the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing to you.”

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Quite frankly, Cathryn and I—with not just two kids in college, but two kids in private college—I don't know how we make ends meet, okay. Some of it is planning over the years, but we didn't plan enough. It's a lot more expensive than we thought. But God is still number one. We haven't reduced our giving. And I'm not asking you to do or challenging you to do something that I'm not doing myself and haven't lived through, young people and young families, the decades that you're just starting on. You can do this, because it's a step of faith. And then let God take care of the rest.

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He can make 90% of what you bring in go a whole lot farther than you or I can make 100% or, most Americans, 110%. Seventy percent of Americans today are living paycheck to paycheck and don't have \$500 in the bank. Are you kidding me? And no wonder people are reaching out for a handout from the government. That's not the American dream, a handout. It's a hand up, okay. And that's called opportunity. But the church is not about the American dream, but we've brought that mentality into the church. And there are a lot of people walking into the church saying, “It's fine if somebody else tithes. Let them give their tithe plus mine, and I'll just hang out and enjoy all of this.” I'm not talking to visitors. I'm not talking to unbelievers still investigating Christianity. We're having a family talk, okay. We're having a family talk. We're in this together. Not equal gifts, but equal sacrifice. And we do that, we all do our part, oh my, what God will do. “Now unto him who is able to do exceedingly and abundantly beyond all that we ask or imagine...” And, believe me, as a staff we're dreaming about a lot. But God says, “Yeah, I tend to pay for this through My people. Because that intersection between your faith and your finances, I'm trying to shape them into the image of my Son. And I'm using that little stuff called money to teach them about faith.” And some of you need to grow in that area. And I'm just encouraging you there today.

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Let's move on to purpose number four. We have worship. We have discipleship. We have ministry. Here's one. How about evangelism? Look inside the early church. The church goes to enlarge His reach. Why the word “go”? Well, it gets back to the mission of the church. Jesus says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” Implied in that is sharing the gospel with lost people.

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By the way, one of the things that we say about a life group here at Shores...you say, “Well, what is a life group? What do we do in a life group?” Well, we SERVE. It's an acrostic that spells S-E-R-V-E. S stands for spiritual formation. That's a Bible study and prayer time that you have together with a small group of people. E stands for evangelism. You see, our life

groups, our small groups, are not just holy huddles. We get outside of ourselves. We get outside of the four walls of the church, and we think strategically about, how are we going to reach other people for Christ? How are we going to do evangelism in our neighborhood? In our community? R stands for recreation. I find that people who play together, recreate together, they have deeper experiences and expressions of community. V is volunteer. Volunteer on the campus on the weekends. It takes an army of volunteers to make all this happen. But we also encourage you to volunteer in your community. Volunteer at the soup kitchen. Volunteer as a coach in the little league. Volunteer. Be the hands and feet of Jesus somewhere in your community. And build relationships of integrity with people who don't know Jesus so you have an opportunity to share Jesus with them. And then E is kind of a catchall for extending care to one another. When life falls out from under you, you have a medical issue or a family crisis, you're connected in community with others who know you and love you and can respond, extending care, extending compassion through local outreach and local compassion projects, and extending to the ends of the earth. That's called missions. And we do all of that as we do life together in life groups. All of that to say the E is about evangelism. The church that goes.

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Verse 47 says, "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." They were giving birth to new believers in Jesus Christ. That should always be a way to measure how healthy our church is. How many people came to faith in Christ this year? How many people have we baptized? I know the answer to that question in so many churches is a big goose egg. And the church has become a fortress and a big holy huddle and a group hug for the already-convinced. And they've lost their passion for lost people outside the four walls of the church- their neighbors, their communities. May we never lose that passion.

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There is an interesting, kind of, math lesson in the book of Acts. It says in Acts 2, you know, on the day of Pentecost Peter preached his message. And "the Lord added to their number daily those that were being saved." A little bit later in verse 47, "He added to their number those who were being saved." Actually, earlier they added 3,000 people. And then he goes to talk in chapter 5 and in chapter 6 about how the Lord was adding to...and then by chapter 9 or so, it just simply says the church multiplied. And I love that change in the equation there. They didn't get to calculus, but they got from addition to multiplication. Why? Because disciples were making disciples. A professor of mine in seminary said years ago, "You can either have a ministry of addition or a ministry of multiplication." And it's all about disciple-making and disciples making disciples.

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Here is the fifth and final purpose. We call this fellowship. The church, I say, is full of grace. We're a grace-filled community. Verse 42 says that, "They devoted themselves to the fellowship." That word "fellowship" is a rich word in the original language, the Greek language. It's the word *koinonia*. Maybe you grew up in a church where they had the Koinonia class. You know, most churches did. And it's a wonderful word. It describes more than just a Facebook kind of connection. It describes more than just saying hi to your friend once a week. They did life together. They had deep, deep relationship. They took the relational risk to do more than just walk into church five minutes after the worship gathering started and, you know, scoot out

the door five minutes before the end. They took that next step, and they gathered not just in the temple, but also house to house. And they got to know each other and do life together.

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One author described two kinds of churches. And I like her analogy here. She says some churches are like a bag of marbles. You know, the marbles are kind of hard and cold. And they're beautiful on the outside. And if you shine the light in just so, they'd sparkle a certain way. But, you know, when you shake up that bag, they kind of clack and clutter and clink with each other. Some churches are like that. She says other churches are like a bag of grapes. And those grapes, you know, when you shake up that bag and you look on the inside, it doesn't always look all that pretty because they're softer. They're more malleable. And now some of the juices are beginning to flow out. But, oh, wouldn't you much rather have a bag of grapes than a bag of cold, hard, clanking marbles? Let's be that kind of church that's a bag of grapes. That's willing to be, kind of, broken bread and poured out wine and juice that flows into each other's lives. Because there is something about how God uses us. The iron sharpening iron. The grape juice...and I'm mixing my metaphors here...but the grape juice seeping into the lives of one another. And He uses that to transform us into the image of Christ even more and more.

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Friends, what I'm trying to say to you this morning with as much passion as I can is, you know, about 30 or 40 years ago there were some visionary people who came together in this part of Virginia Beach. And they planted a church called Atlantic Shores Baptist Church. They had all kinds of dreams about what this could be. And they made some sacrifices back then of their time, of their talent, of their treasure. They gathered together. They were the church. They built a gospel outpost here at Atlantic Shores and here in Virginia Beach. And this place has shined brightly like a gospel lighthouse for almost four decades. Some of you were around during that time, perhaps. Most of us were not. Most of us are sitting here enjoying the fruits of other people's sacrifices of time, talent and treasure. But here we are as the stewards of this industry in this time. There is no guarantee that this church will be here for the next generation. No guarantee it'll be here for your kids, for your grandkids, or for other lost people in community once we're gone. If you have any doubts about that, just travel to Europe and visit the empty cathedrals that have been turned into museums and schools and, now, many of them mosques. It's because there was a generation of Jesus followers who took their eye off the ball. The mission, why are we here, the purpose of the church, and do we have a strategy that aligns with God's purposes to do this thing called church.

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We are the generation that has to own this with our time, with our talent, with our treasure. I make no bones about it. It's going to take some sacrifice to keep this going, as it takes in any church. Because we the people...we can't just live off the momentum of 30 years ago. Every generation has to come along and own it and be the church, be the lighthouse now and in this community. And make sure that we pass this on to the next generation. Not a church that's just surviving, but one that's thriving and reaches even more people for Jesus Christ. And we pass it on from generation to generation until Jesus comes. That's the deep desire of my heart, and I know it is for yours as well. And I thought it would just be good for us to come back as we study the book of Acts and take this little glimpse inside what happened 2000 years ago,

review the purposes of the church. Let's just review them quickly. Worship, discipleship, ministry, evangelism, fellowship.

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Here is what we've done at Atlantic Shores. We take that, and we've turned it into a strategy we call our five G's- gather, grow, give, go, and do it within a grace-filled community. Can you say that with me? Gather, grow, give, go, and within a grace-filled community. You remember the five G's, and you'll be well on your way to understanding what we're doing, why we're doing it, how we're doing it, and how easy it is to plug in in these various ways as we carry out our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ who go and make disciples.

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