

Summer Sermon Series: Stepping Forward in Faith

Step 4: Create a Climate of Positive Updrafts

Isaiah 40:26-31, Acts 2:14-19a

When you look at a church like CSUC, what do you see?

What picture are you painting from the information you are receiving?

I believe the local church is the hope of the world when it is functioning properly.

Current culture may try to push the followers of Jesus Christ to the periphery, but genuine Christian community holds the power to transform the world.

The church will always find itself in creative tension with the predominant culture.

Sometimes, society will permit the church to serve as its chaplain, but not always.

A generation ago, churches were filled to overflowing, that's just how the world worked.

You put up a building, opened up the doors, and people came to you.

However, the world has changed. It's not the same now as it was then.

Sports weren't held on Sunday mornings, businesses remained closed.

Now, you open up the doors of the church and people walk out.

Culture is a fickle friend and the Christian faith is not a popularity contest.

One week the crowds were proclaiming Jesus as Messiah as he entered Jerusalem.

They even took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna!

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the king of Israel!"

The very next week, the same crowds chanted, "Crucify him."

So how does the church of Jesus Christ reclaim its place in the world?

How does it play upon cultural tensions creatively and with integrity?

I believe God has given each one of us the opportunity and privilege

to be ambassadors of hope in our communities and in the world.

God needs people of vision to accomplish God's purpose in the world.

Proverbs reminds us that where there is no vision, the people perish,

but where there is vision, God's people flourish and community is established.

The church can choose to ignore what's happening all around it,

or it can choose to be innovative and recreate itself to reflect

what God is currently desiring to do in our local communities.

And how does God do it? Like always, through people like you.

Listen to the story of Otto Lilienthal who lived from 1848 to 1896. He was a German pioneer of aviation who became known as the Glider King. He was the first person to make well-documented, repeated, successful gliding flights. Newspapers and magazines published photographs of Lilienthal gliding, thereby favorably influencing public and scientific opinion about the possibility of flying machines becoming practical.

In 1894, Lilienthal built an artificial conical hill near his home in Lichterfelde. He called the hill "Fliegeberg" in German, meaning "Aviator's Hill" in English. It allowed him to launch his gliders into the wind no matter which direction it was coming from. There was always a good crowd of people who gathered there, who were interested in seeing his gliding experiments.

Lilienthal made over 2,000 flights in his gliders, starting in 1891. Unfortunately, he died in the summer of 1896 of injuries sustained when one of his gliders stalled and he was unable to regain control.

History remembers Lilienthal as one of the pioneers of modern aviation. In his day, he definitely had his fair share of onlookers and supporters, but there were also detractors like one of the bishops of a nearby Cathedral. He was an extreme reactionary and a narrow-minded man, and he hurtfully and callously contended that Lilienthal's tragic accident proved that mere mortals were not meant to fly.

The most successful businesses and corporations in the market-place, are constantly seeking out ways to stay on the cutting edge of industry. And they do it by deliberately creating a climate within their organization, which allows for what I am going to call 'positive updrafts.'

They know that ordinary people, with ordinary names like Otto Lilienthal, may be the next person to invent the airplane, or the microchip, or the cost-effective non-combustion engine or the cure for cancer. So they do whatever it takes and they go out of their way to encourage the conditions which create for 'positive updrafts' to allow new ideas to fly.

And they understand that things like new ideas and experimental projects and vision and insight and initiative are invaluable assets for the survival of any company or organization. You just can't put a price-tag on these things.

So instead of clipping the wings of people like Lillienthal, smart businesses and smart churches encourage them by creating 'positive updrafts' so they can spread their wings and fly.

That is the vision God has placed on my heart for CSUC. We need to be a place where people dare to dream big dreams for God, where people of vision come to re-imagine what the church could look like, a place where we create a climate of spiritual warmth and creativity, in which all people can feel welcomed and valued and needed.

The prophet Isaiah cast this vision
with his timeless words:

“Those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.”

The apostle Peter reclaimed this vision
for the fledgling church of Jesus Christ:

God says, ‘I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
you will see visions,
you will dream dreams.

¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days.’”

Let’s be that kind of church, one of vision and of dreams.
Let’s have a progressive orientation towards matters of faith.
Let’s look to the future filled with hope and with the Spirit.
And here is how I suggest we begin in the context of CSUC.
Let us reclaim all that is best from our past,
but never allow ourselves to become a victim
of our past success and accomplishments.

What do I mean and I say this in love?

We can’t compare today’s church to a generation ago.

It’s not the same world. Culture is not presently as kind to the church.

We have to stop placing upon ourselves the unrealistic expectation of success by numbers that pretty much all churches experienced a generation ago.

If we play the numbers game, we and every church along with us, are doomed to failure and deep disappointment. So here is what we all need to do together. Listen carefully because it's critically important to the well-being and welfare of CSUC. We need to release ourselves *from* the numbers game immediately. We need to release ourselves *from* completely disproportionate and unrealistic expectations.

And we need to embrace the positive updrafts of what the Spirit is doing in this place, here and now. If we measure our current success by past numbers, we might as well throw in the towel right now, and I might as well pack up my bags and go.

But guess what? I'm planning on staying. And I think you are too because you are here today. And you have been here for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow.

So let's release ourselves *into* a future of hope and significance, and of the Spirit, where we can dream dreams together, where we can soar on wings like eagles and renew our strength.

God's people were never meant to be at the periphery of world events. God intended the church, however big or small, wherever it may be found, to be at the centre and core of human history in the making. I believe the local church is the hope of the world.

And remember the story of Otto Lillienthal and his dream of flight. The Cathedral of the bishop by his Aviation Hill is still standing today. Thousands of tourists from all around the world go there every year to appreciate its architecture set in the beautiful German landscape. And you know how they get there? They fly.