

September 8/9, 2012

State of the Church

Pastor Bryan Clark

Good morning! If you are visiting with us this morning, once a year we carve out a weekend for what we call the *State of the Church*. So this is not by any means a normal weekend for us. Next week will be normal and we'll start into the Book of Romans, and that study will take us basically all the way to Easter. But for this week it's a celebration of what God is doing, a reminder of what we are about. If you are visiting with us, it's still a very good snapshot of who we are as Lincoln Berean.

I'd like to start that this morning by just doing an update on how we did toward our goal with the Food Bank. So drum roll...the grand total is 50,989 pounds! (cheering and clapping) And I have to tell you that total is simply a reflection of the fact that the people of Lincoln Berean were unwilling to stop until the goal was reached. It's a beautiful way to celebrate 50 years. It just reflects kind of the heartbeat of what the people of Lincoln Berean have been like for 50 years. One other thing to note—you see on the slide—there is, in addition to that, which is remarkable, we received a little over \$5000 in cash to the Food Bank so they can also purchase what they need. So that's just all remarkable!

The mission statement of Lincoln Berean is: *To glorify God by seeking to present every person complete in Christ*. The motivation is God's glory and it's seeking to present *every person*. We talk about that a lot in the implications of: what does that mean? How does that affect what we do, why we do it, and how we do it? The strategy has never really been a mass evangelism type of strategy. It's always been a highly relational strategy. It's very simple: that, as God changes our lives, we go out into where we work, into where we live, our neighborhoods, where we do our hobbies, our schools, and share the life-changing power of Jesus with those who are looking for answers, those who are in despair, those who are in need of hope. And as God changes their lives, they come into the life of the Church. They're equipped; they're encouraged; they're built up; and they go back out and it has a multiplying effect. That process basically makes a loop and we refer to it as *The People Loop*. If you are new with us, you may wonder what's with all this *loop* language, and that's the answer. It's just a reminder that this is our strategy. It's very simple but this strategy is obviously built on relationships. And I think we all understand that relationships cannot be cultivated in the fast lane. It requires that we slow down and we focus on the things that really matter. It's about capturing those moments that will never happen again. It's about learning to find life in the midst of the ordinary.

We do believe that every day matters. That was the heartbeat of our launching two and a half years ago, *A Decade on Purpose*. If you'd like to know more about that, it's on the website. But the heartbeat of that was really trying to encourage all of us to think about this decade: frame it in your life—in your season of life—in this ten years, what are the things that will be important to you? What are the things that will matter to you? What are the things that you want to make sure that you don't miss? We don't want you to look back at the end of the decade and wish you'd done it differently. So think about it now, and invest yourselves in the things that really matter. As a part of that, we as a church have several initiatives that we want to define us in this decade. I'm not going to go back through all of those, but just highlight a couple of them.

One of our desires is: we believed God was leading us to be a part of planting fifty ethnic churches somewhere in the state of Nebraska. We felt like that was kind of a specific niche that God was

calling us to. We've tried very hard not to just crash in and do our own thing, but to be very sensitive to what God is doing. One of the things that God is doing is bringing international students into our family here at Lincoln Berean. Last Sunday night Patti and I had the privilege of hosting about twenty Chinese international students. Most of them were Chinese. We had a Brazilian; we had a Peruvian; we had a Korean; the rest were Chinese. We had a wonderful time together. It was so obvious that God is in the process of radically changing these students' lives. As a matter of fact, tonight in the baptism service, one of the Chinese students, a young lady will be baptized. It's just a wonderful testimony of God's power and God's grace. What I would encourage us to do is make sure that we encourage them and embrace them as a family. When they are out in the hallway, trust me, it's not hard to figure out who they are. Make sure that they know that they are loved; they are wanted. Encourage them; pray for them. If you'd like to get more connected with them, just contact me and I'll help you with that. Only God ultimately knows what's going to happen as these students are built up in the faith and sent back around the world to be a part of God's church. We've also continued to resource Solomon and the Sudanese Church. We also continue to be very encouraged about what God's doing in Iglesia Brea, our Hispanic Church, with Adolfo and Hugo. They will have three of their Hispanic new believers baptized tonight as a part of the service. So that's just a great snapshot again of what God is doing.

But we've also wanted to have involvement beyond just our city. And with our partnership with *Mission Nebraska*, God has opened up some wonderful doors making that possible. I'm going to ask Mark to come and tell us a little bit about that. He'll be followed by Jeff, to give us a picture of what God is doing globally.

Mark Matthewson:

Good morning! Lincoln Berean has had the privilege of teaming up with *Mission Nebraska* to provide some Latino pastor and church leader training in the state of Nebraska. So far we've concentrated our efforts in the Grand Island and Lexington areas and about three or four times a year we are able to go there and provide for them some theological and biblical training. Most of these pastors and church leaders have had no opportunities to have any such training. Several have gone to some Bible college, maybe some seminary education but by and large they haven't, and they are just out there on their own. So we've been able to come alongside and give them some tools, some understanding, so they can go back into their churches and be more effective teachers of God's Word, be more effective leaders. This year we were able to spend some time in Lexington and Grand Island areas in January; in May we were out there. Yes, the picture here is a group in Grand Island in May that we were able to go and have a part of. Just yesterday we were back in Grand Island—again a group of about twenty-five Latino pastors and church leaders. Six hours we spent going through the *Sermon on the Mount* and discussing what it is to be a follower of Jesus and how we actually teach our people to be followers of Jesus. It's wonderful to watch these pastors and church leaders and how eager they are to study and learn about the Bible in ways maybe they hadn't thought of before. We also planned yesterday that we'll be returning again in November for more training. They just keep wanting us to come back, and they want more and more and more.

So I want to thank you for the investment you make by participating here in Lincoln Berean Church and helping us to be able to go out to ethnic communities like the Latino community, and be able to offer training to them so that the church of Jesus Christ, not just here in the walls of Lincoln Berean Church, but across the state of Nebraska could have a greater impact on our state.

Pastor Jeff Petersen:

How does a group of people living in Lincoln have an impact, not only on our city, but all around the world? Believe me, it really is not easy. But, by God's grace, He continues to do something special through all of us together. Over the years, one of the ways that Lincoln Berean has had a global impact is through the sending of career missionaries—people who go out from this place and move to somewhere else in the world to use their gifts and talents for the building of the kingdom. This past year has been no exception. In fact, when you add up the singles, the couples, the families and their kids, there are over one hundred people who have been serving all around the world as career, full-time missionaries representing Lincoln Berean this past year. And they are using their gifting in a number of ways: from medicine to education, to sports, to working with children, to theology, to Bible translation, to media, to evangelism, to discipleship, and of course, church planting. And that impact has taken place all over from Texas to Thailand, from Guinea in Africa to Guam in the South Pacific. God is using us all together to have an amazing impact. In fact, if you total up all of the places where we have career missionaries and you add in our indigenous partnerships and our other areas of influence, right now Lincoln Berean is involved in some sort of specific missions endeavor in thirty countries around the world.

Now absolutely none of that would be possible without the countless people right back here in Lincoln who are supporting our global efforts—so many people who are giving generously and sacrificially, who pray regularly for our missionaries out on the field, who encourage them and care for them. It's the entire home team, together, supporting and caring for our global effort that allows our missionaries and our mission efforts to continue all around the world. One of the most exciting things that I'm excited about from this past year is a major step that we took as a church to do an even better job of supporting and caring for our troops who are out there. In March Chris and Molly Ebbers and their kids transitioned from being Lincoln Berean missionaries serving in Japan to serving right here in Lincoln—to serve all of our missionaries around the world as our new Associate Pastor of Global Outreach. And a big part of Chris' role is going to be working specifically to encourage and refresh and build into the lives of the missionaries all around the world, as well as to walk alongside any of you who are right here in Lincoln who think that God might have missions somewhere along the journey for you. So we are really thankful that God did that this past year and for what God has done by bringing all of us together to support these great efforts.

Finally, we've been excited this year about the ways that we've been able to be involved together in serving—whether that's many people who serve right here in Lincoln to help us build our global outreach or the many people who've begun to get out there and personally serve hands-on. In fact, this past year, just about eighty people went out from Lincoln Berean on short-term mission trips. Many of those went to India as a part of our medical, our agricultural, and our educational resource teams. In fact the leader of our medical group is in India right now, as we speak, working with forty Indian nationals in community health initiatives, to help them care in some of those most poor and needy rural areas. We also were excited this past summer to see the largest-ever sending of short term missionaries out on summer short-term missions from Lincoln Berean, as we had teams head to Spain, to Poland, and also to Sweden. In fact, it's in Sweden that we are excited about the new partnership that God has given us with New Life Church in Stockholm. You see, Sweden is now a place where churches are dying every single week. In Stockholm, only two percent of the people will be in church on any given weekend. But New Life Church has a vision to see God change that, and they are actively reaching people in amazing ways. Our team this summer literally got to be a part of helping with three new church plants all across the city and got to be used by God in amazing ways. We are looking forward to see what God will do with that partnership even more in

the days to come. And we are planning to tell you more about that during our global-focus weekends in November. We are also prayerfully considering what God has for another trip back there short term, and other short term opportunities as well. We plan to announce those in November as well, so look forward to those global-focus weekends the first two weekends in November.

But this morning, mostly what I want to do is say: thanks to God and to all of you for this great body that joins together here—right-smack-dab in the middle of the United States—to have an impact that literally reaches around the globe as we, as a church, *seek to help present every person, in every place, complete in Christ.*

Pastor Mark Kremer:

This morning we would like to share with you an exciting opportunity that we believe God wants us to consider, and also a God-size challenge that fits with our *Decade on Purpose* that is right in line with what we believe God is calling us to do as His people. Just to sort of set the stage for that—so you understand where some of the language we are going to use is coming from—I just want to read a couple of verses to you from 2 Corinthians, Chapter 3, where Paul is giving some definition to what his life and his ministry were really all about, what he was up to, and what God was up to. 2 Corinthians 3, verse 2 says, as Paul writes to the Corinthians:

You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested (or demonstrated) that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts. And such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as *coming* from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (*NASB, 2 Corinthians 3:2-6)

Paul's life was all about people and partnering with God in what God was doing. And in this text we see that what God was doing was writing a new story in people's lives, taking people who were broken, people who were in bondage, people who were filled with guilt and shame, and writing a brand new story for their lives. And right beside God, every step of the way, has always been God's people, partnering with Him, caring for those people and helping to write those stories—those brand new stories—and that's really what the mission of Lincoln Berean is. That's what we are all about: it's about people. That has led us on some interesting journeys down through the years.

Nine years ago this month we launched into a major expansion project here at Lincoln Berean that ultimately resulted in this auditorium we are sitting in this morning and a new youth complex that sits here to my right, outside the Northeast doors. I can honestly tell you that none of us who were leading at the time were very excited about all the work and all the money that it was going to take to create those facilities, and we didn't do it because that just sounded really exciting to us. We did it for only one reason and that is: that people matter. Because people matter to God, they matter to us and, at that point of our history, we had a big problem. The problem was that, as we went out to live out this strategy that Bryan talked about: of sharing with our neighbors, our family members, our friends, our coworkers, and we began to introduce them to the Jesus that we worship and know, when they got interested in coming to Church with us and learning more, and worshiping with us, there was absolutely no place for them to sit!

My own family experienced that firsthand. We attended here about four years before I came on staff. We lived seventy-five miles away. One Easter Sunday we drove seventy-five miles to Lincoln Berean and never got into the service. Trust me, that was not a pleasant car-ride home with four little kids. But we were believers; we were not going to walk away from God. But how many people I wondered, on that Sunday, came and didn't have a seat and never got to hear the message that their friends had wanted them to hear. That just simply wasn't acceptable.

So we launched into that *For This Purpose I Live Campaign*. We shared the challenge with our people. The people of this church responded generously and, together, we pledged around eight million dollars towards that project. Now, when it was all said and done, it cost about fourteen and a half million dollars to build these two buildings. Well that sounds like a lot of money and it is a lot of money but what you need to know, that you may not know, is that the cost per square foot of these facilities is so incredibly low, compared to similar construction, that people literally are taken back when they see the value of what we got for that amount of money. One of the things we determined to do, when we built these facilities, was to make sure they were large enough to accommodate growth for years to come. That had been a problem in the past. We built some new facilities and, about the time a year or so after we were in them, they were already full. We were determined not to do that again because we didn't want to keep coming back and doing buildings. So there are large unfinished spaces in both of these buildings, including a balcony that's above us here this morning. It's already there and built—only needs seats and carpeting and lights and a little bit of air-conditioning and heating and we can have room for another thousand people here in each service. The youth complex is the same thing. So we are excited about having this opportunity to continue to grow and reach out to people.

Now as of today, five years after we have gone into these facilities, we have just five million dollars, or a little less than five million dollars, to pay on these facilities. In other words, in the last eight years, two-thirds of all the things we've been doing have been paid for, which is really a tribute to God's generosity and greatness in His working among us. Many of you I'm sure have do-it-yourself projects at home and you're building something or maybe you've been remodeling something or you've been restoring something and you know, when you have those projects and you've worked on them for a while and you just can't seem to get them finished, they just sort of sit there and linger. Now you really want to get onto other things. You're tired of talking about it; you're tired of thinking about it; you've tired of working on it; you just want to be done with it. You want to be done with it and move on because there're other things that are more important and more interesting and more challenging.

I think that's exactly how we feel with this remaining five million dollars on our mortgage of debts. We believe that God has all these incredible opportunities available to us locally, regionally, and globally and yet, every time we have a discussion about how we can be involved in those things, we say, "Yeah, but we have this unfinished debt." So we believe that in this 50th anniversary year, now is the time to tackle that remaining one third of our debt and get it finished, once and for all, so we can move on to the bigger things that God has for us in the years to come. It's just time to get it done. And that's what we are asking God to do. One of the motivations for getting that done is the fact that, if we continue to pay off the mortgage as we do today, it'll take at least another six years until that's done and will cost us another \$600,000 in interest payments alone—money that could be redirected directly to seeing lives impacted and changed here and around the world. We would love to see all of those resources redirected into people, to writing new stories in people's lives.

So we are launching this weekend a campaign to finish it up. We are calling it *Unwritten*; you'll see it on the front of your Loop and it really conveys two ideas: There's this *unwritten* part of this chapter of our church's history that just needs to be written. It's time to get it done. And if we can do that, we can begin to walk beside God and partner with Him to write hundreds and thousands of new stories in people's lives. Let me just give you a little bit of the details of what we think is possible and how we'd like to do this. There're about 2100 individuals and families who give on an annual basis to Lincoln Berean. If 2100 families give, on average, \$100 a month to this *Unwritten* campaign for twenty-four months, the debt will be gone. In less than two years we'll be completely debt free. Now there are many of us who can do more than that; some may actually want to do a one-time gift of an asset—of some land or something. We also understand there're people who can't give \$100 more a month to this campaign. Many of us already are giving to *The Purpose Fund* to paying off the debt, and we are going to ask you to let us know what you plan to continue to do. Maybe you want to increase that or change that or continue to give the same thing. We are going to count all of that towards this. But we are going to ask you to pray about being involved over the next twenty-four months in getting this chapter written, finished, and put behind us. It is this thing—this cloud that sort of hangs over the things that we believe God wants us to do.

So when you come next weekend, you are going to get a commitment card like this and we are going to simply ask you to pray for whatever time you need, to pray over the next few weeks as to what God would have you do to be involved in getting this written. You are going to have a chance to turn that in; there's no name attached to it. We don't ask you to tell us your name; we are not going to follow up with you as an individual. This is between you and God, but I would remind you that it *is* between you and God. So you listen to God; you ask Him what He wants you to do. Then you make that commitment and then follow through in obedience to what He's called you to do.

When we did the first campaign eight and a half years ago, many people saw that as a tremendous new point of growth in their own life—when they learned about generosity and giving for the first time. It was the first time for many people that they began to give regularly. We believe that will happen again for a lot of folks, that it will be a life-changing, transforming moment of growing in generosity in their own life. So, again, we just want you to pray and prepare yourself for this.

Going forward, I just want to remind you that there are just two funds that we have here in the church. There's the *General Fund* and, out of that, all of our ministry is funded—including missions now. All of that comes out of the general fund. The commitment we are asking you to make in the next few weeks is not related to that. So that's the ongoing giving.

But there is this other fund that we've called *Purpose* in the past—it was just for debt reduction. Now we are going to just change the name to the *Unwritten Fund*—same fund—every penny that's given to that will immediately be applied to the debt. We'll literally empty it out at the end of every month so that every dime goes, and we can pay off as quickly as we can. But we believe, in twenty-four months or less, we can be done with this chapter and these facilities will be paid for. And really, for the first time in thirty years, there won't be a single bit of debt on any of the facilities for Lincoln Berean. That will free us to write new stories in partnership with God here and all around the world. And we are very, very excited about that. So I invite you to seriously consider what God would have you do, to be a part of finishing this chapter and writing new stories. Tonight you are going to see in the fifty-four people who are going to be baptized, the motivation to get that done so we can invest more in people's lives because *every person matters*. Our desire is: *To seek to present every person complete in Christ* and that's where we want to invest our time and resources. Thanks.

Pastor Bryan Clark:

As Mark was reviewing these past years, my mind goes back to an elder meeting about ten years ago. The growth of the church had kind of grown stagnant; the giving actually was declining; we were definitely in hunker-down mode. But there was something bubbling up within us. It was the voice of God saying, “It’s time to trust Me. It’s time to take some significant steps of faith.” In that meeting we wrestled with that decision. It went late into the night. There was struggle; there were tears shed; there was just this wrestling match about coming to grips with this decision. Is it possible that we could be the Elder Board, after all these years, that just destroys Lincoln Berean and leaves a massive financial disaster that the generations to come would have to clean up? By the time that evening was over, we had concluded that God was leading us to take some massive steps of faith. Claudine Lehman told me that after the Elder Board decided to build the C-wing—what we now call the chapel—which, for them, was a huge step of faith, that he (Pastor Curt Lehman) went home that night after the meeting; he put his face in his hands and he began to cry, and he kept asking, “What have I done to these people?” When she told me that, I can’t tell you how that resonated in my own soul as I wrestled with, “Have we made a huge mistake?”

The weekend that we launched this vision to the congregation, you could hear people gasp. It wasn’t enough just to build this auditorium and the youth complex, but we believed God was leading us to hive off a group of people and start a church in North Lincoln, one in the intercity, a hundred churches in India—all within three years. You could feel the tension in the room. In the hallway between services, one person literally said to me, “I think the elders have lost their minds.” And I wasn’t sure if that was true or not. In the midst of all of that and all of the emotions churning, the only time in eighteen years that I’ve been here that this has ever happened, there was a blowup between the Elder Board and the Business Team—some confusion, some misinformation and some challenges we had to work through, but there was this sense in which, “This is war!” There was a sense that, “This is really going to be a challenge.” Over the next several weeks it was amazing the way the people in the body responded. They went home; they prayed about it; they sought God’s will and people came back and said, “Hey, we believe God’s in this. We believe we can do this and we are ready to go!”

What has happened is nothing short of remarkable. This weekend alone, well over fifteen hundred people will walk through these doors and have an opportunity to gather to worship that simply would not have had a seat had we not taken those steps of faith. The youth complex, North Point has a building and is thriving. We’ve planted well over a hundred churches in India and God is continuing to move. I do believe, when we look back and assess the legacy of this generation—our generation—the conclusion will be: These were people that trusted God. These were people that put their fears aside, stepped out by faith, trusted God, and God honored that and did remarkable things. And part of our legacy will be that this generation will hand to the next generation arguably the nicest church facility in the state of Nebraska. I’m always intrigued by people that criticize churches for building buildings but the next day they call and say, “Can we borrow your building?” Buildings are tools for ministry; they are nothing more than that, but they *are* that. At the end of the day, you do have to have some place to put people in order to carry out ministry and this is a magnificent facility. This is an amazing tool that God has provided. But I firmly believe that our legacy will be, not only will we hand over this magnificent facility to the next generation as a tool for ministry, we will hand it over one hundred percent debt free. That is remarkable, as Mark said, for the first time in thirty years. We still carry debt from the C-wing—the chapel; we carry debt from the D-wing; we carry debt from here. We believe, in twenty-four months, every debt can be

wiped out, which would be our legacy for the next generation so that they could maximize their resources, not to clean up our mess, but for kingdom purposes.

At the end of the day, it's good to remind ourselves that it's not about buildings; it's not about strategies; it's not about mission statements. It's about people, and people's lives who have been radically changed by the power of Jesus. There're many of you here this morning; you were in that service that weekend years ago and you felt the tension; you remember what that was like. And what God has done has been remarkable. But there are many more of you that have become part of our family now over the years, and it's good to remind yourself that the people sitting next to you have sacrificed a lot for you to have that seat. We would ask that you would prayerfully consider being part of the team and let's get this thing done. What a wonderful testimony of the generosity of God and God's people that would be to this community. One of the reasons why we have the baptism service on the eve of the State of the Church is because, after talking about all these things, we want to remind ourselves it's ultimately about changed lives—and these are the people whose lives have been changed. It is a wonderful service of celebration as we see the power of Jesus to change lives. And you'll see the faces and the names and the lives tonight as we celebrate that together. Before we are dismissed this morning, I want to remind us that God is still in the business of changing lives by telling us just one story of a life that has been changed.

Life in the Loop Video (Testimony from Jane):

I come from a family of eleven children. My father was a very angry and bitter man. There was a lot of abuse, emotional and physical abuse in the home. I was sexually abused by a family member when I was seven. When I was fifteen I can remember the first time I really just wanted to die. I think the hardest part was that I couldn't get away from this feeling of being alone. How do you be alone with so many people? When I finally got out on my own, my desperation was that somebody had to be out there who would love me. I got married. It was in the first year I got pregnant. I found out that my husband had been cheating on me for all of our marriage. He left us, just abandoned us. I was destroyed. Alone meant more to me than any other thing...it was just one more stack of alone in my life. I knew that when I looked at my daughter, my baby daughter, with all my being, I loved her. And when I had that kind of love for this child, I knew there had to be something out there beyond what I had lived and what I had experienced in my life. I wanted to know what that was. I wanted to know how that felt.

When we first started coming to Lincoln Berean, her and I both got involved in the Easter drama, and we did it for three years. The drama team, the Easter drama, they wrapped their arms around us when we came and they invited us in and the church stood up and was there all the time. It had the programs; it had the messages; it had the teaching; it had the people that just wrapped their arms around me and said, "I know, I know what you are going through." I got an opportunity to start the Divorce Care group here. I went through the healing of divorce and sexual abuse and abandonment and physical abuse, until it came to the point where the last thing I needed to deal with was the loneliness. The loneliness was the hardest one.

I went to my room and I got on my knees and I said, "Lord, I'm tired of the fear of being alone. I don't want to have that fear anymore. I want to know that I am never going to be alone." I said, "I don't know in my heart that You love me. I understand it in my head but I do not know in my heart that You love me." And He took me through the journey—all the healings that He had provided for me—and He said, "See, when you were here, when you were being abused, I was right there with you; I cried with you." And He said, "Remember when you went through the sexual abuse; I was

right there with you and through the abandonment and through the destruction with Sarah, all the way through those times...” He said, “I loved you.” When we were finished, He said, “Is that enough? Will that be enough? Is My love enough for you?” And I said, “Yes, I believe You. I now know in my heart You love me.”

From that day forward, I never questioned, not one time in my heart, God loves me. I want people to know that there’s healing and there’s life and there’s freedom from whatever has happened in their lives that’s indescribable. Because of what He’s done in my life, because of what God has done, I will never be alone...ever. Forever, I’ll never be alone.

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