

INTRODUCTION

My preaching theme for January is “2002: A Church on Purpose.” Every successful organization and business has a purpose for which they exist. The purpose of the Kelly Springfield plant is to manufacture tires. If they suddenly decided to make their main purpose teaching piano lessons instead of making tires, they would soon go out of business. The purpose of our fine hospitals is to provide health care. How long would they stay in business if they changed their purpose to washing cars? Now, there’s nothing wrong with piano lessons or washing cars, those are good things to do, but those things can never become the primary focus of those organizations.

If someone asked you, “Why does Green Acres Baptist Church exist?” I hope you could answer correctly. Our church has formally adopted a purpose statement. There are hundreds of things a church could do that are good things, but a clearly defined purpose statement keeps us focused on the best things we can do. We exist to exalt God’s greatness; evangelize God’s world; equip God’s people and express God’s love (that’s *what* we do and here is *how* we do it) – through Jesus Christ our Lord. Over the next four weeks, I want to challenge us to be *on purpose* in three different directions: across the aisle; across the street; and across the globe.

As we look across the aisle, I want you to literally look across the aisle at the people around you. We tend to be creatures of habit. Most of you sit in generally the same area each week. How many of the people around you do you really know? Do you know their names? Do you know their hurts and sorrows? Do you know their points of joy? Do you *care* to know them and to know about them? Or are you content to just see them each week and smile and shake their hands during our welcome time?

Green Acres is truly one of the greatest churches in America, but I believe we can become more intentional in reaching across the aisle to love one another. In the first letter the Apostle John wrote, he had a lot to say about loving one another. Many people call I Corinthians 13 the love chapter, “love” is found eight times but I think I John 4 should have that designation where “love” is used 27 times. Let’s listen to how God is directing us to relate to each other across the aisle: I John 4:7-12:

Dear friends, let us LOVE ONE ANOTHER for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to LOVE ONE ANOTHER. No one has ever seen God: but if we love each other, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us ... vs. 19: We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.

In the 1970s the Beatles had a song that said, “All you need is love...everybody now...” Actually, I disagree with John and Paul. You need *more* than love. I think “all you need is God.” But God is love, so if you know God then you’ll have plenty of love. The problem with our

English word "love" is we only have that one word to describe a wide variety of emotions and feelings. I may say, "I love my wife" or "I love chocolate ice cream" or "I love America" or "I love to play golf." Those are totally different experiences, but I used the same word: love.

Most of you know God chose to write down His Word called the New Testament in a language called Koine Greek, because it was and is one of the most expressive languages in history. In the language of the New Testament, there were four totally different words for "love." There was *storge*, which meant a family type of love you would have for your parents, spouse or children. There was another word, *eros*, to describe romantic or sexual love. The word *philia* meant a love for your neighbors or country. But the word used in the Bible to describe how God loves us and how we ought to love one another is the word *agape*, meaning a practical, unemotional love that is a choice rather than a feeling.

Before you can truly love others, you must accept the fact that God loves you. In our passage, we read that God loves you so much He sent His only son to die as your sacrifice for sin. I don't know if I love you enough to let one of my children die for you, but God loves you that much. I like the way Max Lucado puts it: "If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If He had a wallet, your photo would be in it. He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning. Whenever you want to talk, He'll listen. He can live anywhere in the universe, and He chose your heart... Face it, friend. He's crazy about you."

Last September, we had Love Your Neighbor (LYN) week. I want to declare January as Love One Another (LOA) month. Actually, let's let 2002 be LOA year! I want to share with you three practical ways to reach across the aisle and love one another in our church:

I. L.O.A. BY CONNECTING WITH OTHERS

The tragedy of our technologically advanced culture is so many people live in isolation, unconnected with real people. It's so easy to let Frazier or Raymond or Seinfeld become your friends. Or you can jump into a chat room on the Internet and talk with people you've never met before and be anybody you want to be. You may be "connected" to your Internet server, but that's not the same as being connected with real people. The Bible says the church is like a family. I like to refer to our church as the Green Acres Family. That's why it's important just to show up on Sundays. Every Christian needs to connect with brothers and sisters in Christ on two levels. First:

1. In a large group, we celebrate together

That's the reason we gather in this large room every week to sing songs of praise and to pray and study God's Word. Our purpose is to exalt the greatness of God. Private, meditative worship is something we should do every single day during our personal quiet time. Family worship and devotional times are very important also. But when we gather here on the Lord's Day, we come to do as the Psalmist says: "Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together." (Psalm 34:3) We come to do as Psalms 100 says, "to make a joyful noise unto the Lord!"

As I prepared for this message, I begin to remember how my family went to church every Sunday when I was a kid. I recalled something that now seems so important to me, but at the time I missed it’s significance. Every Saturday night, my dad had a ritual. He called my brother and me to bring him our Sunday shoes—and then he would shine them. We’d put them on our feet while he applied the polish and took a rag and buffed them to a high shine. My brother and I each wore one of my dad’s shoes while he shined them as well.

Looking back on that, I discover a very important family lesson. My dad started preparing to take his family to church on Saturday night. We never woke up on Sunday morning and wondered if we were going because of the weather or we overslept. The decision was made on Saturday night with the shining of the shoes. Cindy can tell you I still “get in the zone” on Saturday night, and I’m not much of a party animal. She calls it my PMS (pre-message syndrome)! Dads and moms what a great lesson to teach your kids. Start preparing them to go to church on Saturday night and it will be a lesson they will take with them through life. Showing up for worship is the first and easiest way to connect.

2. In a small group, we care for one another

I love gathering with several thousand folks to worship and praise God—but the real *life* of our church doesn’t happen in this room. It’s what happens in the small groups we call Sunday School classes or Bible Studies. That’s where we equip God’s people and express God’s love.

In the book of Acts, the early Christians enjoyed a large group experience (they gathered in the Temple courts) and then they also met in homes for a small group experience of sharing together. That should be your pattern. If you are not involved in a small group, you are missing out on the very best our church has to offer. If all you ever do is attend a large worship service, you won’t have a network of Christian friends who know your name and who care about you and your needs. When trouble comes in your life—and it *will* come—you need a smaller group of friends to minister to you.

The first church I served in 1971 only had about 100 people who attended. Everybody knew everybody else. Either you were a part of the Wiggins’ family or the Jacob’s family. If there was a sickness, or a death, everybody knew about it and everyone pitched in to help. Small churches still operate that way. But in a church as large as Green Acres, acts of mercy and ministry can’t take place on the congregational level; they have to take place on the class level. Every Sunday School class in our church is like a little church within a church where the members love each other and care for each other. Part of our job as Christians is to: “Carry each others burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2) The only law of Christ is to love God and love your neighbor and the best place for that to happen is in a small group Bible study. I could give you dozens of examples where small group Sunday School classes carry the burdens for their fellow members. That’s the Body of Christ at work. If you aren’t connected with other members through a small group, you may face a crisis and the church may never know about it unless you tell us.

Our attendance figures reveal many of you are not yet connected in a small group. For instance, at the 8:15 Bible study time, we generally have around 1,400 people attending but then at the

9:30 worship we have around 1,900 people in attendance. What does that say? About 500 folks in worship at 9:30 don't attend a small group Bible Study.

If your excuse is you don't like getting up that early, don't worry, we are in the process of developing an 11:00 Bible study structure, so after you attend 9:30 worship, you can stay and be a part of a small group. The same is true for the 11:00 worship service. We generally have about 1,800 people in that service, but only about 1,500 in the 9:30 Sunday School time. That means about 300 people are in the 11:00 service who aren't in a small group. Add those two together and we discover there are about 800 people who show up for worship but aren't in Sunday School—they are W.A.O.'s. (Worship Attenders Only) That ought to set off an alarm for you!

Do yourself a favor; make a New Year commitment to join in a small group. Call Ken Warren's office, or my office, and just say, “Brother David was talking about me Sunday. Tell me where I can get connected with a small group Bible Study on Sunday mornings.” We *need* you—and you need us!

II. L.O.A. BY ENCOURAGING OTHERS

Another reason we come together is to encourage one another. One of my favorite scripture passages is found in Hebrews 10:25: “Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Did you notice the big “D” in the word “Day?” Jesus is coming back soon, and we are closer to that Day today than we were last Sunday so we must be more diligent to “give courage” to each other. People are discouraged and tired. This old world really does try to get you down. Our job is to encourage each other in the Lord. Here's a couple of ways to do that:

1. Use verbal and written words

You can use words to tear people down or to build them up. The Bible says Christians should be using words to help others. In Ephesians 4:29 God says: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.” Ephesians 4:29

I've said before, we could all pray the church would be like the “home on the range” where “seldom is heard a discouraging word.” But in the real world, and even in churches there are plenty of people and problems that discourage us. I receive so much strength from the words and notes I receive from you. I read once it takes 20 positive notes of encouragement to negate the effect of one letter of criticism.

Today, most Americans consider Abraham Lincoln to be one of the greatest of American presidents. However, during his presidency, he was severely criticized and castigated by many Americans—and finally assassinated. The Library of Congress retains the items he carried in his pocket on the night of April 14, 1865, when he was shot. They were: (1) A handkerchief embroidered “A. Lincoln”; (2) a small penknife; (3) a glasses case; (4) a purse containing \$5; (5) an old newspaper clipping folded and refolded. The newspaper article was a speech given by John Bright in which he wrote, “Abraham Lincoln is one of greatest men of all time.” Abraham

Lincoln must have been so discouraged by all his critics he carried that article with him so he could take it out and read it and re-read it.

Here’s a good LOA assignment for this week. Find five people in this church, who may have had some discouraging times over the past few months. Send them a note or e-mail and just encourage them. Or call them or take them to lunch and tell them you think they are wonderful and that you are fortunate to have them as a friend.

2. Use acts of kindness

During LYN (Love Your Neighbor) week, we performed acts of kindness to strangers. During LOA week, do something kind for someone you know in our church but don’t do it so they will repay you. And be sure to do it in Jesus’ name. The Bible says in Ephesians 4:32 says: “Be kind and compassionate to one another ...”

Some of you play dominoes seriously, but the only thing I did with dominoes as a kid was line them up and then push the first one over to watch the chain reaction. When you perform an act of kindness to someone, it can start a chain reaction of kindness. I heard the funny story about a local barber who decided he would show more kindness and appreciation to folks in his town. When a local policeman came into his barbershop, the barber said, “I really appreciate all you do to keep our community safe, this haircut is free.” The policeman said thanks and the next morning the barber arrived and found a dozen fresh doughnuts waiting at his front door. The local florist came into the shop, and he said, “I appreciate the way you use flowers to make our community so pretty, this haircut is free.” The next morning, when the barber arrived there were a dozen fresh roses waiting at this front door. A preacher came in and the barber said, “Preacher, I appreciate all you do to make our community a better place to live, this haircut is free.” The next morning when the barber arrived he found a dozen preachers waiting at his front door!

Your next LOA assignment this week is to perform at least three intentional acts of kindness for someone within our church. Your kindness will serve to encourage them in the Lord!

III. L.O.A. BY SEEKING RECONCILIATION WITH OTHERS

Because the church is like a family, we aren’t perfect. Relationship problems often occur within the Body of Christ. In New Testament times, Paul and John Mark had a disagreement. Paul had to challenge two women by name in the church in Philippi (Euodias and Synthyche) to stop bickering and start agreeing together. Part of Loving One Another is making a commitment that we will address relationship problems according to the scriptures.

Nobody enjoys these kinds of confrontations, but they must happen if a church is to be healthy. John Maxwell says there are three kinds of people who address personal conflict in the church. There are those he calls the **hid**ers, they just ignore the problem and sweep it under the rug and the problem just gets worse. Then there are the **hur**lers, who love throw truth in the faces of other Christians. They like to say, “the truth hurts, huh?” They speak the truth, but not in love. Finally there are those who are the **heal**ers, they always seek to heal broken relationships according to the directions of Jesus in Matthew 18. Let’s say you have a problem with someone

in our church. Maybe they have offended you, or said something to you or about you that hurt you deeply. Here’s what to do in love:

1. Go privately to them

Don’t slander the person by complaining to someone else about what that person did or said. Go to the person first. The first step is to deal with it as two individuals under Christ. Jesus said: “If a brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.” (Matthew 18:15)

The question arises, “Who should make the first move for reconciliation?” Jesus said if someone sins against me, then I should go to them. But in Matthew 5, He also said if I bring my gift to the altar and there remember that a brother has something against me, for any reason, I must also go and make it right. The one who moves first to initiate reconciliation is always the one who is most sensitive to the Holy Spirit. Certainly, if you are aware of a broken relationship with someone, you shouldn’t be waiting for the other person to come crawling to you. So whether you have been offended, or you were the one who offended a brother or sister, as soon as the Holy Spirit convicts you, GO and make it right. Go alone and don’t put it off—but go as healer. The goal is not rebuke but restoration.

If you have been offended, don’t start the discussion by pointing the finger of blame. Instead, approach the person humbly and ask if there was anything you have done that might have caused a problem in your relationship. If you are the one who has committed the trespass against the other person. Don’t say, “I’m sorry, but if you had only ...” Or don’t say, “IF I was wrong, forgive me.” Go ahead and take responsibility. Say, “I was wrong when I (fill in the blank). I’m sorry, will you forgive me?”

I believe over 90% of all relationship problems can be resolved in this private encounter if both parties are under the Lordship of Jesus. Here is your toughest LOA assignment: If you are aware of a relationship problem between you and someone else in our church, go to them privately as a healer and make it right. A final warning: don’t you DARE talk to anyone else about it until you have lovingly and privately confronted that person. If you involve someone else, you have violated scripture, and that in itself is grounds to go and ask their forgiveness. But what do you do if that person won’t agree to resolve your relationship? Then Jesus said you

2. Go patiently with others

The private discussion restores the relationship most of the time. But several times throughout my ministry I have been the mediator who has gotten involved with two Christians who were not able to resolved their broken relationship privately. Jesus said: “But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” (Matthew 18:16) The purpose of taking a friend or two to talk with the other person is not to “gang up” on them, but to work together to resolve the problem. The best kind of person to take is someone who can be unbiased about the issues and who loves you enough to be honest with you if you are at fault. It’s extremely important that you never involve a third party until you have exhausted all hope of settling the difference between the two of you privately. I believe

over 99% of relationship problems are resolved by step one or two. But in very rare cases, a person will not accept your offer of reconciliation, even after a group of two or three have confronted them. The next step according to Jesus is to

3. Go prayerfully before the church

This is always a final resort, and hopefully a church never has to get to step three. Jesus said in Matthew 18:17: “If he refuses to listen to the, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. Now, what does that mean? Do we kick them out of the church? No, it means we treat them the same way Jesus treated pagans and tax collectors. He loved them, and spent time with them, but He made it clear they needed salvation. If someone refuses to accept the simple steps of personal reconciliation, the church should be notified, and people should pray for that person as if they were not a believer—and chances are, they aren’t really, or they would have followed the scriptures and the relationship would have been restored in step one.

You can’t be right with God if you aren’t right with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Years ago my friend Al was attending Southwestern Seminary and he was invited to preach revival services in a nice church in a Texas city. The revival was scheduled to end on Sunday morning. All week long, the crowds were good, but Al said there were no decisions of any kind. He said it seemed as if there was an atmosphere of spiritual bondage or restraint that permeated the congregation. He didn’t know what the problem was. He spent hours praying; asking the Lord if he was the problem. On Saturday he was down at the church office studying, and he went outside to get a drink of water. Around the corner, heard two ladies talking who didn’t know he was there. One lady said, “Did you know that Ethel, the president of our WMU absolutely despises Frank, the chairman of our deacons?” The other lady said, “No, I didn’t know that!” The first lady said, “That’s right, she won’t even close her eyes and bow her head when he prays!” Al got a pretty good hint of what the problem really was in the church but he didn’t know what to do about it.

The next morning, Sunday, Al was standing on the platform with the pastor. He got an idea and whispered to the pastor asking him if he call on his chairman of the deacons to pray the offertory prayer. The pastor did, and during the prayer, Al covered his face and peeked through his fingers (the Bible says to “watch and pray”). He could see a lady standing on the third row with her head up, eyes open, arms crossed in defiance—refusing to bow her head while the man prayed. Al still didn’t know what do to.

He got up and started preaching, and although it had absolutely nothing to do with his message, right in the middle of his sermon he just inserted the statement, “Why I even know of one church where the president of the WMU won’t bow her head and close her eyes when the chairman of the deacons prays.” Then he just kept on preaching as if he’d never said it.

The invitation was given and nobody came forward. The revival was over, without really being a revival. The service was dismissed and the pastor went to the back door to speak to the people leaving. Al said at that moment, he heard a commotion and he turned in time to see this dignified lady running down the aisle sobbing with tears of repentance. She hugged Frank and said, “Oh, dear brother will you forgive me? I haven’t loved you as I should and I’m sorry.” At that

moment, Al said, the Holy Spirit showed up. Everyone knew these two leaders didn't get along, so they stood there in awe as God mended the relationship. Nobody was leaving the building, because everyone sensed God was doing something. The pastor walked back in and they re-opened the invitation, and Al said when they started singing "Just as I am" again, seven people were saved and many others got right with God and with other believers. Revival broke out. It happened because two Christians were willing to get together and seek reconciliation with each other.

Is there anyone in our church membership you really haven't loved the way you should? Are you harboring bitterness or resentment toward anyone? Will you go to that person and lovingly, humbly begin a process to restore your relationship? Will you reach across the aisle?

At the center of each of these statements there is a CROSS. Jesus died on a cross so we can be reconciled with God—He made the first move. He died so we can also reach out and be reconciled with each other. Will you receive His love today—and then love one another?

OUTLINE

I. LOVE ONE ANOTHER (L.O.A.) BY CONNECTING WITH OTHERS

1. In a large group, we celebrate together

"Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together." *Psalm 34:3*

2. In a small group, we care for one another.

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." *Galatians 6:2*

II. L.O.A. BY ENCOURAGING OTHERS

1. Use verbal and written words

"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." *Ephesians 4:29*

2. Use acts of kindness

"Be kind and compassionate to one another ..." *Ephesians 4:32*

III. L.O.A. BY SEEKING RECONCILIATION WITH OTHERS

1. Go privately

"If a brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over." *Matthew 18:15*

2. Go patiently with others

"But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." *Matthew 18:16*

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"If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." *Matthew 18:17*



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If you borrow the majority of a message or outline, I encourage you to simply preface your remarks by saying something like: ***“Some (or “much” as the case may be) of the ideas I’m sharing in this message came from a message by Pastor David Dykes in Texas.”*** This simple citation may prevent any criticism that may be directed toward you.

To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes