

INTRODUCTION

Maybe you can help me. There are some things I just can't figure out. Can you help me answer these next ten questions? (1) Why is the third hand on your watch called the second hand? (2) Why do we say something is "out of whack?" What is a whack and how do you get in one? (3) Why do "slow up" and "slow down" mean the same thing? (4) Why do "fat chance" and "slim chance" mean the same? (5) But why do "wise man" and "wise guy" mean the opposite? (6) Why do we sing "Take me out to the ball game" when we are already there? (7) Why is "phonics" not spelled the way it sounds? (8) If all the world is a stage, where is the audience sitting? (9) How come "abbreviated" is such a long word? And finally, (10) Why can't Baptists love each other?

Perhaps you've been reading this week about the continuing squabbling and bickering between Baptists in Texas and the Southern Baptist Convention. I have definite convictions about all of that but I am mainly embarrassed about the way our fussing has wounded our witness for Christ. Frankly, for the first time in 30 years of preaching I'm about ready to go out in front of our church and spray paint over the word "Baptist." These days, "Baptist" seems to be synonymous with "bickering." The old adage that you can have three Baptists in a room and have four opinions is not far from the truth!

Actually, I believe part of the problem is we have shifted too much focus on national and state denominations instead of the primacy and authority of the local church. And every Baptist church is totally independent. There is no denomination that tells us what to believe, preach or do. The main channel through which God has always operated is through the church, not some denominational body.

In 1 Timothy 3:14-15, the Apostle Paul is instructing the young pastor Timothy. He gives us a powerful picture of the primacy of the local church. Paul writes: "Although I hope to come see you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the Living God, the pillar and foundation of truth."

Every year the President of the United States delivers a State of the Union address to the combined Congress and the Supreme Court Justices. This long-standing tradition allows our President to comment on current conditions in our nation and announce future plans and programs. For the past few years in the fall, I have delivered a State of the Church message to our congregation.

Let's start by reviewing where we are now. I don't really love to shop, so malls aren't my favorite places. But my wife is an all-star shopper. She has made the Visa Hall of Fame the last two years. Cindy loves to go to a new mall. She always heads straight to the layout maps in every mall. In a flash, she zeroes in on the little icon that says, "You Are Here." In a matter of seconds, her brain assimilates the entire layout and the stores she wants to visit. I'm still looking for the "You Are Here" sign. Finally, she gets her game plan and I usually say, "I'll just meet you in front of Starbucks" in a couple of hundred dollars." That doesn't take long.

The point is, before you can go where you want to go, you must know where you are. Let's start today by reviewing some of our vital statistics. Statistics can be cold and dry but numbers are the only things you can actually measure. You can't really quantify things like who is growing in Christ, who has a better marriage, who has more joy. I'm saying statistics only tell a tiny part of the story but they do give us a measurable indication of what God has been doing.

PRAISE GOD FROM WHOM ALL BLESSING FLOW!

1. Our current membership is 9,933

That's for a church that started a little over forty years ago with less than 300 members. Of course, there are lot of people on our rolls who never come. They joined at one time, but then they became spiritual dropouts. You may wonder why these people are on our rolls but as I've said before, a church membership roster is mainly a prayer list.

2. Our Sunday School enrollment is 6,415

That means we have a large number of people who are on our membership roll but aren't enrolled in any Sunday School class. I believe every GABC member should be involved in either working or attending a small group Sunday School class. That way, there will be a smaller group of people who know your name and can pray for you and help you if you ever have a problem.

3. Sunday School attendance averaged 2,988 last year

4. Our average worship attendance was 3,181

There are only a handful of churches in America averaging more than 3,000 in attendance. I don't know of another church in America of any denomination that has over 3,000 in attendance that is not located in a metropolitan area of at least 250,000. That is just one factor that makes Green Acres unique. In terms of new members,

5. We baptized 196 people last year

I believe we should baptize at least 300 people each year. However, our church is more evangelistic than this number reveals. We are leading many people to Christ from other areas and so we don't have the opportunity to baptize them. For instance, over 100 teenagers were saved last Spring during our Wired Week but we only baptized about 20 of them. Judgement House concluded last night and a total of 179 people accepted Christ. Many of them will go back to the churches in their own communities to be baptized.

6. The total amount of new members last year was 659

Some of those were saved and baptized but many of them transferred their membership into Green Acres. We are working hard to come up with a more effective means of assimilating our new members into the life of our church.

What about money? If you are new to our church, you probably have noticed I don't preach much about giving money. I believe that if a person truly loves Jesus, then they will *want* to give of their financial resources for the work of God. During the last 12 months, I have preached exactly one message on giving.

7. The total amount of all offerings was \$11.2 million

That's including budget, *Discover the Joy*, Missions, etc.

8. The total amount we have given so far to *Discover the Joy*, (our building fund) has been over \$18 million

I give God the glory for your faithfulness in this area. When we first started talking and praying about this project three or four years ago, we contacted various lending institutions about financing. Nations Bank (now Bank of America) offered to loan us up to \$15 million at the rate of 7.47%. This was to be a line of credit that would convert to a fixed note in April of 2001. Based upon a giving profile, we expected to begin to access this line of credit in November of 1999. Here we are a year later, and do you know how much we have had to borrow so far? ZERO! Bank of America isn't too happy with us so far, because they haven't made a penny of interest. That really breaks my heart! Last year, our Finance Committee saw we weren't going to need the full line of credit so it was reduced from \$15 million to \$11 million that is available.

Of course, I am praying we won't have to borrow nearly that much. Up to this point, your giving to the building program has been so good; we have been able to pay all the construction bills in cash. In addition, over the past 18 months, the Finance Committee has taken the available cash and safely invested it until it was due and the money you have given has earned \$975,000 interest. That's the kind of interest I like!

Even though we have not borrowed a penny yet; I need to inform you we are about out of cash, and Everett Brazeal tells me we may have to access our line of credit in December or January. That's okay. We have made wise provisions to do this through our church budget. But I just want to encourage you to remember the more we give up front, the less interest we spend. Don't you want to see how long we can keep the Bank of America waiting?

Green Acres is one of the leading churches in America in giving to missions and participating in missions.

9. We gave a total of \$1.14 million to missions last year

We are the leading church in Texas in giving to missions through the Cooperative Program and we are #2 among all the 47,000 churches in the Southern Baptist Convention.

10. Last year 2,784 of our people participated in mission projects

These folks were involved in working at the Good Samaritan Outreach Center, Volunteer Christian Builders, mission trips, summer mission activities and too many other projects to name.

I'm not certain, but I would confidently assume there is not another church in the entire Southern Baptist Convention that could report that many volunteers in mission work.

So I am here today to pat you on the back and say, "Great job, Green Acres! I'm so proud of you! I'm thankful to be the pastor of such an awesome group of people." But mainly, I want to give thanks and praise to our Heavenly Father for what He has done through you.

In the remaining moments of this message I want challenge you in four areas of excellence for this next year. First, we must

I. HEIGHTEN OUR UNDERSTANDING

We have a term today called "heads up." When we want someone to be aware of something important, we say, "I want to give you a heads up." It's a picture of someone who lifts their eyes so they won't be caught unprepared. I want to give you a "heads up" today on the church, not just our church, but what the Bible says about the primacy of the local church.

1. We must grow in our understanding of the importance of the local church

In the passage we read earlier, we see the church described in three ways. First, Paul says it is "God's household." It's not referring to a building but to a family. Think about the people who live in your household. They are your closest family members. The church really is to be thought of as a family and we are brothers and sisters. If you are looking for a family, you will find people here who will love you and accept you.

Second, he identifies us as the "church of the living God." That's a pretty good name for a church. The word church is *ekklesia*, "ek" means "out of" or "out from;" *kaleo* means "to call." So the word church means "the called-out ones." It never refers to a building, it always refers to a group of people who have been called "out of the world" and called into the Body of Christ.

Third, Paul calls the church "the pillar and foundation of the truth." Timothy was pastoring in Ephesus and was familiar with the great Temple of Diana there. Diana was the Roman mythological goddess of the hunt, the Greeks called her Artemis. This temple in Ephesus was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It was 425 feet long, 220 feet wide and 60 feet high. There were 127 marble pillars, each one a gift from a king. Many of the pillars were inlaid with gold, silver and precious stones. No doubt Paul is employing this imagery when he is describing the church. The church is both the foundation and the pillar of the truth.

That means we are built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ who *is* the truth. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3:11, "No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ." But we are also the "pillar" of truth. That means the church holds high the truth and supports the work based on the truth. When a person looked at the temple of Diana, they were forced to lift up their eyes. When we do our job as a church, people are forced to lift up their eyes to see God.

In the 1960s and 1970s some people predicted the coming death of the local church. Some social "experts" were predicting churches would soon become as outdated as the horse and buggy. Mark Twain once read a report in a newspaper that he had died. In response, he wrote these classic words: "The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated." I'm happy to report when it comes to the vitality of the church, "the reports of its death were greatly exaggerated." The church of the Lord Jesus is alive and well. The largest and most productive churches in history exist at this moment. To borrow a 1960s phrase, "The church is where it's at."

You see, for a real Christian, the church is not optional. Jesus established the church. He did not merely establish individual Christian living. He established corporate faith. When Peter made his confession that he believed Jesus was indeed the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Jesus announced He would build upon that confession a community of believers. He would call this community of faith His church.

We are the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ, the Building of Christ. We are God's family and the foundation and pillar of truth. There has never been a better time in history to be a part of the Church of the Living God. I congratulate you for being a part of great church as we begin the 21st Century.

2. We need to heighten our understanding of our purpose

Every effective organization has a clearly defined purpose statement. This mission statement is used to keep everyone on the same page. Green Acres has a purpose statement. Here's a pop quiz. How many of you can fill in these next four blanks before I tell you? Go ahead and try. [pause] If you wrote:

Exalt God's greatness
Evangelize God's world
Equip God's people
Express God's love
Through Jesus Christ our Lord!

That is correct! Our purpose is to worship and adore God—exalt His greatness. We exist to take the good news of Jesus across the street and across the globe—evangelize God's World. Our goal is to help you discover your spiritual gifts then lead you to minister in the name of Christ—equip God's people. And we believe God has called us to demonstrate His love to a lost and wounded generation through good stewardship of our resources—express God's love. But all of this is only possible through Jesus Christ our Lord (Boss, ruler, master, leader).

So I challenge you to raise your understanding of the importance of the church and to heighten your appreciation for what God is doing and wants to do through this Body of believers. Also, we must:

II. LENGTHEN OUR CORDS

That may sound a little strange but it is based upon what we find written in Isaiah 54:2-3a, "Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes. For you will spread out to the right and to the left." We are enlarging our tent, all right; we are spreading out to the left and to the right!

Now the church is *not* a building, it is people but this passage is talking about a meeting place, a tent. God warns about the danger of keeping your tent so small you can't welcome enough people into your dwelling. In our context, I believe this speaks to what we are doing in our construction project. There are two areas I want to address as we "enlarge the place of our tent."

1. We must be prepared for the opportunities of a new facility

Sadly, there are some churches that make a conscious decision they no longer want to grow. They think their "tent" is big enough. They allow the size of their "tent" to determine the size of their congregation. It reminds me of the guy who was fly fishing for rainbow trout. Every time he caught one, he measured it. If it was over 9 inches long, he tossed it back. A fellow fisherman finally asked him why he threw back the big ones and kept the small ones. The fisherman replied, "Because my frying pan is only 9 inches wide!" They guy needed a new frying pan.

I am grateful to God that Green Acres has always been a church willing to enlarge its tent. Even before I came, the church was willing to build and grow. Just since I've been here we have tripled our acreage, bought a shopping center and now we are building the largest worship center in East Texas. When this building we are in now was first built in the early 1960s, some people said it was way too big and we would "never fill it up." Thank God we built the church anyway. Then this building was enlarged in the 1980s to its current size and some people said it was too big—and now we have three morning services.

If any of you have even entertained the thought that our new 3,500-seat sanctuary is too big, think again. We are going to start out with two worship services, and I expect the day will come when we will have to go back to three. And then, after I'm dead or retired, if the Lord tarries, I expect that twenty or thirty years in the future, that building will have to be replaced with a bigger one! God tells us to enlarge our tent! By building this new building we are opening the curtain or our tent wide and saying, "Welcome, come on in! We are making room for you."

But in order to "enlarge the tent" we must make sure that we "lengthen our cords" and even "strengthen our stakes." Now, I'm not much of a camper. I don't know a lot about tents. Cindy's idea of "roughing it" is the second floor of a Holiday Inn. But I suspect if you enlarge a tent and use ropes that are too short and stakes that are too light, the first time a strong wind blows . . . goodbye tent. What does it mean for us to lengthen our cords? It means we must expand and enlarge our outreach and ministry. It means we must become more of a praying church. We must design and develop new ministries to be ready for growth. We must be prepared for the influx of people who are going to come into our church.

Sometime next spring we should occupy our building. People in other cities often ask me, "Is the building ready yet?" A bigger concern of mine is this: "Are we ready for the building?" We must have a prepared people ready to enter a finished building. We have a blue-ribbon team of people

in our church who have already been working for months on making the transition a time of deep spiritual commitment. I will be calling on us to spend forty days of fasting and prayer before our dedication services in May. Before we have the first service in the building, we will ask many of you to sign up in 30-minute shifts to read the Bible out loud. We are going to read the entire Bible aloud from the pulpit in the worship center. We will be calling on teams to go into the various areas and pray. In other words, enlarging the tent is the construction, and lengthening our cords is the spiritual preparation. Will you be ready spiritually for what God is going to do?

"Strengthening our stakes" makes me think of the financial challenge we face. So,

2. *Discover the Joy will become Share the Joy*

Discover the Joy has been the theme of our stewardship effort to raise the funds to pay for this construction. I've already reported about how generous you have been. When we started receiving DTJ gifts in April of 1998, we asked you to make a three-year commitment to give. That three-year period will expire in April of 2001. We are going to be totally honest and up front with you. We aren't going to require any of you to keep giving after that date, unless you hear a word from God. In April *Discover the Joy* will be history. Somebody suggested we call it "Rediscover the Joy." And many of you have said that while some churches have "together we build" Green Acres has always had "forever we build." *Share the Joy* will be a new, lower keyed emphasis where I will ask everyone in our church to consider doing two things. First, I am going to ask you to pray about giving a one-time sacrificial gift on Dedication Sunday, which is scheduled for May 6. Then, I am going to ask those of you who will, to consider making a regular weekly or monthly offering to pay down the debt on this project. Many of you have joined our church after we launched Discover the Joy. This will be your chance to join us in this miracle of sacrifice. Our Finance Committee wisely included enough money in next year's budget to handle the interest and principle payments on a \$7 million loan, financed over 15 years. But I am praying we will be able to pay off that loan much, much earlier than 2016! After all, our next project is to turn our current office building into first-class preschool and children's space.

If you have truly discovered the joy of sacrificial giving, I am praying that you will share the joy with the rest of us. Next, we must:

III. WIDEN OUR VISION

Our church has been involved in mission work in South and Central America, Europe and Africa. It's time for us to look even further. We must

1. See the needs

When Jesus was talking to His disciples about God's desire to change people one person at a time, He said, "Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest." (John 4:35) When you ride around Tyler and see all the beautiful churches, it is easy to forget there are 4 billion lost people on this planet. Most of them are in China and India.

I am asking every one of you to ask God to cure you of spiritual nearsightedness so you can start focusing on, praying for, and going to people in different cultures to carry the good news of Jesus. Don't be overwhelmed by the millions who have never heard the word "Jesus."

Some people can only see the problems but faith gives us the ability to see the possibilities. I heard about a shoe company that manufactured and sold shoes. Years ago, they sent a shoe salesman to a very primitive country in Africa. After two weeks the salesman wired back, "Bring me home, these people over here don't even wear shoes!" They brought him back and sent another salesman to replace him. After two weeks, this salesman wired back, "Send me all the shoes you've got—I've never seen so many prospects!" When you look at the lost world, do you see the obstacles or the opportunities?

2. Embrace the planet

Over the next three years, I am challenging our church to attempt something bigger, harder, and more expensive than anything we have ever done before. We are currently searching for a city in China with a population of less than 200,000 (there are hundreds of such cities) and little or no Christian presence. Once we find that city I want us to enter into a three-year partnership to "adopt" that city. You can't legally do "mission work" in Communist China but they are interested and open to our American Culture. What we will be doing will be under the auspices of a "cultural exchange." We won't go over there and preach. It's against the law. We won't even go as Green Acres Baptist Church, but as citizens of Tyler. We can easily send businessmen over to establish or assist Chinese businesses. We can send medical personnel to "study" and assist the doctors in that city. We can send musical groups, sports teams and I want you to give us *more* creative ideas about how we can make an eternal difference in a Chinese city. We can't reach all the way around the planet at once, but we can sure embrace one city at a time.

It is going to cost a lot and it is going to require many of you get out of your comfort zones and use your hard-earned vacation time to travel to China for this "cultural exchange."

In a land where there are thousands of churches and the gospel is preaching thousands of times every day, most of the world is still lost. I don't think it is right for anyone to hear the gospel twice until everyone has heard it at least once!

IV. DEEPEN OUR LOVE

There are two ways I want to challenge us in this area. First, we must

1. Demonstrate love to our community – LYN

Can you guess what those three letters stand for? *Love your neighbor*. People in our community don't care how much we know until they know how much we care. We have scheduled a LYN week in September 2001. I am going to challenge every ministry and every member of our church to be involved in this emphasis. During that week, I want us to practice intentional acts of kindness to our community. We are going to station folks along walking and jogging trails to

pass out free bottles of cold water. We are going to invite all the single moms in Tyler to come and have their oil changed and their tires checked—free of charge. We are going to offer a truly free car wash; no donations will be accepted for any of these acts. For those of you who still cook, we are going to ask you to bake thousands of homemade cookies and we are going to take them to our policemen, firemen, schoolteachers, nurses; you name it. We are just going to try to come up with as many ways as possible to simply demonstrate the love of Jesus to our community. We are going to need hundreds of volunteers and we are going to need hundreds of creative ideas of how we can show East Texas the love of Jesus.

We must

2. Express love within our fellowship – LOA

Can you guess those letters stand for? *Love one another*. A Pastor was talking to me several weeks ago about Green Acres and said it must be nice to be a part of a church that really doesn't need anything. He commented on how many buildings we have, how many people we have attending, and how much money the folks have given. He ended by saying, "I guess your church really doesn't need anything!" After pondering that thought for a moment, I said, "Yes, God has blessed us in marvelous ways, but if I had to put my finger on the *one* thing we need the most, it would be more love for one another." Oh, we aren't an unloving church. We are friendly, caring and compassionate. But I don't think most of us have really discovered what it means to really love one another. I am praying God will send us a revival of love. I know it takes more than just saying it, but I think that's a good place to start. I think we need to tell each other more often that we love each other. I don't tell you enough that you are precious to me, and that I cherish you as individuals and as a group.

Jesus said the true mark of a Christian was not a fish on your bumper, or a cross around your neck. He said the only totally authentic way we show we are His disciples is by our love for one another. He said in John 13:34-35 "A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." I hope we can cover our campus with little and large signs that just have "LOA" on them that act as reminders for when you are looking for a parking spot: LOA, when you are standing in a crowded hallway: LOA; when you are entering the FLC or the 110 Student Center: LOA.

CONCLUSION

Some time ago, I read a book by Anne Ortlund entitled *Up With Worship*. The main thing I got out of the book is that she pointed out that Christians are either like marbles or grapes. Marbles are individual units that don't affect each other except in collision. They just bang up against each other. And this is what the world sees [hold up glass of marbles]. Here, does anyone want a drink of that? Jesus is the vine and we are the branches but the fruit He produces in us is love. The luscious fruit of love should characterize our lives. We ought to be more like grapes than marbles [holds up a glass of grape juice]. I could have held up a cluster of grapes, because we are individuals like different grapes in a cluster but instead, I took it step further to show you what Jesus wants to accomplish in us. When you spend time with Christ, He crushes your selfish, self-

centered, self-exalting spirit but then He places you in a love relationship with a bunch of other individual grapes. I have a word for all you grapes: Jesus loves you and He wants you to love the other grapes. Do you know how I learned that? I heard it through the grapevine! The result of this is something no individual grape could ever accomplish. We are squeezed together by love until we become the delicious, healthy new wine that gives beauty and fragrance to the church. There are hurting, thirsty people out there. When they come to Green Acres, I pray they won't find us like this [marbles]. God help us to mingle with each other with such spiritual intimacy that we become like this [wine].

When Jesus performed the miracle of changing water into wine in John 2, the dignitary at the feast made this observation. "Most people serve the best wine first, and then when everyone's taste buds have become less sensitive, they serve the cheap stuff. But you have saved the best wine for the last." (see John 2:8-10) Do you see the lesson? This is a great church with a great history. It has done a lot of great things over the past 45 years. But what do you think will happen when we totally submit to Jesus and allow His love to turn us from a bunch of grapes or a bag of marbles, into the sweet new wine of His church? Listen to me Green Acres, Jesus is saving the best wine for the last. The brightest and most exciting days of our church are yet to come!

OUTLINE

PRAISE GOD FROM WHOM ALL BLESSINGS FLOW!

1. Current membership: 9,933
2. Sunday School enrollment: 6,415
3. Average SS attendance: 2,988
4. Average worship attendance: 3,181
5. Total baptisms: 196
6. New members: 659
7. Total offerings given: \$11.2 million
8. Total given to *Discover the Joy*: \$18 million
9. Total given to missions: \$1.14 million

I. HEIGHTEN OUR UNDERSTANDING

1. Of the importance of the local church
2. Of our purpose:
EXALT God's greatness
EVANGELIZE God's world
EQUIP God's people
EXPRESS God's love
Through Jesus Christ our Lord!

II. LENGTHEN OUR CORDS

"Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes. For you will spread out to the right and to the left. *Isaiah 54:2-3a*

1. We must be prepared for the challenges of a new facility
Discover the Joy will become SHARE THE JOY

III. WIDEN OUR VISION

See the needs

"Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest?' I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest." *John 4:35*

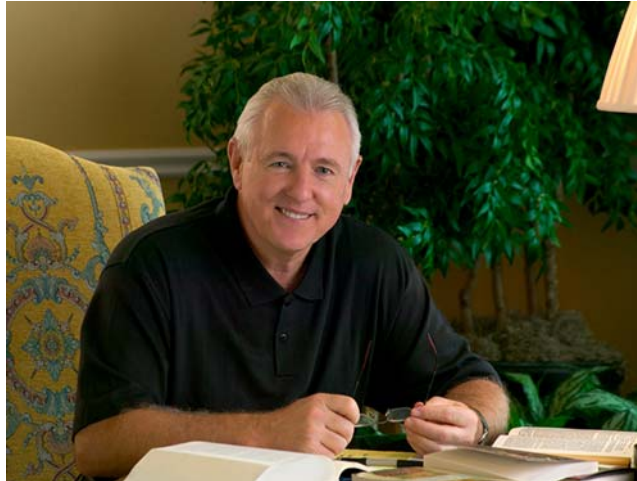
Embrace the planet

IV. DEEPEN OUR LOVE

Demonstrate love to our community – Love Your Neighbor

Express love within our fellowship – Love One Another

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." *John 13:34-35*



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If you are a preacher or teacher, I encourage you to use this material to stimulate your own Spirit-driven imagination. Additional study beyond this material will benefit both you and your listeners. You have my full permission to use any of this material as long as you cite the source for any substantial amount used in your message.

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