



Mount Helm Baptist Church

**Mapping the Future:
A Preliminary Pastoral Reflection and Summary of Recommendations
for the 2011-2015 Strategic Plan**

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“A community is like a ship; everyone ought to be prepared to take the helm.”

I. Introductory Summary

The primary objective of both *Navigating Forward: Charting the Future of our Church and Community Together* (June 9, 2010) and *Navigation Conversations* (Wednesdays, September 2010)² was to “prayerfully discern a shared, Spirit-driven vision and imagine together what our church and community *should be* within five years.”³ Thus, these town-hall-like dialogs were a pastoral invitation to congregational collaboration with and contribution to the 2011-2015 strategic vision⁴.

The data gathered from these and other participatory sessions substantiate previous assertions that the congregation (“Mt Helm”) is overwhelmingly desirous for reform and revival. The oldest black church in Jackson, Mt Helm aspires to end its approximately thirty-year slow decline and thereby restore its relevance. It anticipates fresh vitality, visibility, and viability in the months and years to come. These are already being seen by the increase in visitors and the addition of new members, as well as the rebranding and notoriety garnered by the church’s historic call of its youngest pastor.

In order to sustain this momentum, Mt Helm generally holds that a number of changes in the function and culture of the church are necessary. Though there is not absolute agreement on how and when these changes will occur, most members have accepted that change is no longer an option; it is inevitable. Most are therefore prayerfully open to the Spirit’s leadership and prepared to be guided into a new era of ministry and purposefulness.

These self-examining sessions more specifically found that members were most concerned about worship culture, church ministries, beautification of properties, newer media technologies, and increased financial resourcefulness. Many of these concerns were motivated by an honest appraisal of Mt Helm’s inability to effectively adapt its mission within and for the rapidly changing culture.⁵ The present creative tension is discerning how to maintain some of the historic mystique of the church while adapting it to the contemporary religio-cultural realities that, if neglected, will mean certain demise.⁶ Though

¹ Cited from the cover of the September 29-October 5, 2010 (Vol 9/No 3) edition of the *Jackson Free Press*.

² These were congregation-wide visioning meetings initiated by the Pastor.

³ From *Navigating Forward* agenda.

⁴ This plan will in part supplement, refine, and in some ways amend the Long-Range Plan adopted by the Church September 29, 2005 (Constitution and By-Laws, Appendix A, pp 37-39).

⁵ Mt Helm, like many historic elite Protestant churches, has not appropriately responded to the seismic cultural and philosophical shifts that have occurred over the last several decades. Desegregation, and the resultant exodus from urban areas to the suburbs; postmodern shifts in religious cultural sensibilities; resistant to intergenerational and non-sectarian possibilities; and many other historical factors complexly contribute to the national decline of older congregations that once were the center of the (black) religious constellation.

⁶ Though Mt Helm’s collective self-understanding for the last few decades has been that it was and is an elite church serving the spiritual needs of several of Jackson’s black bourgeoisie (E Franklin Frazier) and thus ministered in styles reminiscent of classical and baroque Western European and Victorian rationalism, there were of course moments in the life of the church that differ from this common narrative. The historical record bears this out. Many of the members, for example, have been blue collar workers.

marginalized by such realities⁷, Mt Helm is confident that the same providential grace that has continuously sustained it will persist both now and in the future, for the God who began a great work in it shall complete it unto the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:6).

Though indispensable and helpful, these conversations have nevertheless been insufficient. Many important topics were merely broached and will need to be revisited in more depth in the weeks to come. Some special attention will be given to smaller settings and one-on-one conversations for deeper reflection at those times.⁸ All the pertinent data accumulated from both the *Navigating Forward* and *Navigation Conversations* will be engaged along with other data by both the pastor and the members of the Strategic Analysis and Implementation Leadership (SAIL) Team. The first draft of the 2011-2015 Strategic Plan will be presented for review and possible modification no later than the second week in November in a special meeting, and the final draft will be published and implemented January 1, 2011.⁹

In order to introduce you to more of my thinking towards the five year vision, what follow are (1) a preliminary articulation of my ministry manifesto for the church (to be published along with the strategic plan); and (2) an assortment of pastoral, congregational¹⁰, and visitor recommendations made over the course of these collaborative discussions.

II. Preliminary Reflections on ‘Navigating Forward’

In this section I will share some of the theological and ecclesiological reflections that will be documented in a ministry manifesto that will accompany the strategic plan. The manifesto will both provide the ecumenical and intergenerational/intercultural thought that structure my pastoral vision, as well as articulate the elements that support and purposes the visionary strategies to be executed beginning in 2011.¹¹ What is shared below is a sampling of my thinking about Mt Helm’s audacious mission:

Presently, the congregation still maintains the dominant narrative, though it should be noted that congregational schisms and certain demographic shifts within the congregation have diversified the religious sensibilities overall. Thus Mt Helm may be best presently described as a church living “between times.” Some yearn for more pristine and cerebral worship while others seek to experience God in ways mediate through more holistic and emotionally satisfying ways. The challenge will be to maintain the unity of the faith in the bond of the Spirit as we minister more effectively to the diverse spiritual yearnings resident in the present congregational makeup.

⁷ An honest assessment evidences that Mt Helm is no longer the elite church that it once was and presently struggles for visibility and viability.

⁸ For example, Dr Bill Cooley will be facilitating a focus group with 25-45 years old members and visitors to solicit specific information about how Mt Helm can better minister to and empower this demographic. Also, I will be meeting with certain ministries, boards, and committees in order to garner more clarity of their specific desired goals.

⁹ If needed, please inquire for more details regarding this process.

¹⁰ I include former members, mainly relatives of present members, in this category.

¹¹ Though being theologically formed in an expansive evangelical worldview (Southern black Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal/Holiness, Eastern Orthodox, to name a few), I’m thoroughly convinced that a biblically grounded Kingdom mindset that engages the contributions of the universal Church—across racial, geographic, denominational, gender, generational, and temporal boundaries—is the most faithful way to bear witness in the Spirit to Christ and his present and future Kingdom.

As a flagship church, Mount Helm exists to demonstrate and provide transformative Christian leadership in our city and world.¹² *Our adaptive challenge, then, is to help individuals and communities navigate a changing world and to invite them into a deeper life with God (Luke 5:4a) that will lead them to holistic transformation, and in turn call them to be transformative leaders.*

This commitment to a Kingdom-seeking, Spirit-anointed ministry of exemplary excellence calls for “moral grandeur and spiritual audacity” (Abraham Heschel) and a “revolution of values” (Martin Luther King Jr) for the critical times in which we live. As one of the nation’s oldest churches, we *must* lead the way in cultivating the kind of courageous leadership that will provide substantive and sustainable solutions to some of this millennium’s most daunting problems. In doing so, we will indentify and/or develop from among ordinary people both in Jackson and elsewhere those who are *or will become* what Robert Franklin, president of Morehouse College, has called “socially conscious Renaissance [people].” These kind of women and men are or will become through patient cultivation “well-read, well-traveled, well-spoken, well-dressed, and well-balanced”¹³ to the glory of God. Said differently, we must be committed to raising up Spirit-filled revolutionaries who are “spiritually disciplined, intellectually astute, and morally anchored,” to borrow the language of ethical leadership scholar Walter Earl Fluker.¹⁴ As the flagship church, a Mother Church to several Baptist churches as well as a Holiness and Pentecostal denomination respectively, we will be the premier congregation at the “helm” of such needed spiritual and social renewal.

Five Ships and Two Priorities

Thus, the historic Mt Helm, in the name of Jesus and in the power of the Spirit, will provide its members and others the following: (1) bold **leadership**, (2) life-changing **worship**, (3) costly **discipleship**, (4) faithful **stewardship**, and (5) intentional **fellowship**.

We will courageously lead as transformed nonconformists (King)¹⁵, dedicated to a Kingdom way of life that impacts the spiritual, moral, intellectual, political, social, and cultural crises of our present age. From a biblical perspective, this leadership is best grounded in transformative encounters with God. Through cerebral and celebrative, reverent and relevant worship of God in Christ through the Spirit, we are better prepared to be positive change agents, ethical leaders motivated by the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Experiencing God in wonderfully life-changing ways, we are to count up the costs and deepen our faith and vocation through a life-long voyage of teaching and sending in the name of Jesus. Since our whole lives are to be ordered by the Lordship of Jesus, then all that we are, all the we do, and all that we have must be responsibly and cheerfully gifted

¹² This is a high calling, a heavenly vision, a covenant into which we must enter soberly and joyfully.

¹³ For more information, please visit Morehouse College’s website: <http://www.morehouse.edu/>.

¹⁴ See his book *Ethical Leadership: The Quest for Character, Civility, and Community*, as well as his interview with Tavis Smiley (http://www.pbs.org/kcet/tavissmiley/archive/200905/20090507_fluker.html).

¹⁵ “This hour in history needs a dedicated circle of transformed non-comformists... The saving of our world from pending doom will come, not through the complacent adjustment of the conforming majority, but through the creative maladjustment of a nonconforming minority.” Martin Luther King, *Strength to Love*

to God for the healing of the world in service to a mission greater than ourselves. And understanding the lives to which we have been called cannot be done in isolation, as individuals-in-community we must strive for the unity of the faith, loving the “Other”, prayerfully reaching across race, class, gender, culture, and denomination in order to be formed interdependently into a beloved community of blessed justice, faith, hope, and love.

Therefore, as *a leading church cultivating transformative leaders* we should spend the next five years cultivating excellence and stimulating human flourishing by addressing our state’s and nation’s education and economic epidemics. Well resourced with intelligent and economically prosperous congregants, Mt Helm has an awesome opportunity to contribute to the empowerment of communities through innovative holistic educational and economic perspectives and possibilities that raise the consciousness and abilities of some of the most marginalized in our city and world.

Kingdom-Mindedness and Spirit-leadership

Beyond mere cliché, we are called to seek God’s kingdom above all else (Matthew 6:33). Being led in, through and by the Spirit’s anointing, we will better live out this mandate. It will require that we are conformed to a Kingdom way of life by going deeper in our faith and praxis. We will have to be more open to the Spirit through spiritual disciplines (like prayer, fasting, etc.), dependent on God’s wisdom and direction, and submitted wholly to the Lordship of Jesus. Being a Church, a signpost of this glorious Kingdom, we must resist the temptation to be anything else—whether social club, entertainment hall, political rally, or otherwise.

The Kingdom of God is not reducible to a denomination, region, or cultural preference. It transcends culture, for it is not of this world (John 18:36), while also bearing witness through (Spirit) baptized believers in “the kingdom of culture” (WEB DuBois). Therefore, we must understand ourselves as a local manifestation of the one, holy, apostolic, universal Church, contending always to the faith deposited to us, and ready to profess always that Jesus is Lord of all. We are the Church, sustained by the Spirit, earnestly expecting the return of our Lord in glory, and must not be seduced from this truth.

III. Comprehensive Recommendations by Category

The following recommendations are a sampling of those given by various persons during our sessions and in direct pastoral conversations. This list is not exhaustive, but outlines preliminary movements toward certain strategic goals. I have not specified which are my own and which are from members, former members, or visitors, respectively. For tonight’s meeting, I’ve only listed four areas of interest. They are listed categorically.

Worship¹⁶

¹⁶ Worship culture has taken a disproportionate amount of the conversations. This was so much the case that we have not engaged as seriously what we need to go in terms of outreach, missions, and overall service to the community.

1. Move Sunday service times to 11 am to provide more time intermissive fellowship (possibly coffee and juice in the annex) and intercessory prayer between Sunday School and the worship service.
2. Reformat the order of worship as to better facilitate the spiritual and structural flow of service (e.g. move Giving to after the sermon).
3. Provide various musical arrangements for hymn singing and include more hymns not found in the Baptist Hymnal (e.g. purchase African American Heritage hymnals, add more non-Baptist hymns to repertoire.)
4. Allow first Sunday to have a more classical feel due to Communion Service, whereas expanding and integrating more contemporary praise and worship music (thus joyfully and skillfully singing hymns *and* newer songs) for 2-4 Sundays as to minister more effectively to the varied spiritual yearnings presently resident and for those being evangelized. Hence, services will be blended as opposed to segregated by preference.
5. Invite guest college choirs/ensembles to minister on fourth Sundays as a means of embracing wider spectrum of sacred music and as a way to evangelize college and graduate students.
6. Graphically and stylistically contemporize the bulletins and even later discontinue their use.
7. Changing or clarifying language “Caring and Sharing” on bulletins so visitors are clear that this is a benevolence offering.
8. Add monitors (TV flat screens) in sanctuary (either mounted onto or placed in front of walls near organ/piano) to display order of service, words to songs, and announcements.

Visitor Relations

1. Have a welcome center in church foyer that provides information on services and other FAQs.
2. Only have first and second time visitors stand for recognition (after third visit, make yourself at home), without asking them to necessarily share information church members (since some people are not actively involved in church).
3. Provide gift (small bag, complimentary CD of sermon, etc.) to first and second time visitors and immediately send them (e-) mailed correspondence as a follow-up.
4. Create a song or something that creatively acknowledges that Mt Helm welcomes them.
5. Move the recognition of visitors to after the announcements and allow that to conclude in a brief fellowship respite brought to a close by pastoral comments.
6. Have visitors fill out short, restaurant-like evaluation card regarding their worship experience.

Christian Education

1. Improve quality of teaching in Sunday School by implementing teachers’ orientation and continuing training and certification.
2. Exclude pastoral remarks from Sunday School review.
3. Expand Christian Education offerings to include life and living skills small groups (financial literacy, book/movie clubs).

4. Institute a theological education seminar that trains lay, licensed, and ordained ministers, as well as instructs members and larger community in theological subjects (Bible, doctrine, world religions, etc.)

Strategic Partnerships

1. Maintain or develop relationships with churches with which Mt Helm has intimate history: First Baptist Jackson, Church of Christ Holiness (USA), Church of God in Christ, historic Farish Street Churches, and daughter Baptist churches (Farish St, Pearlie Grove, Cade Chapel, Mt Calvary, Koinonia, etc.) for purposes of shared mission, resources, and strength.
2. Strengthen relationship with Jackson State University.
3. Have greater impact on Jackson City Council, Mayor's Office, Downtown/Farish St/JSU development.
4. Have a more "glocal" perspective, identifying metropolitan, state-wide, national, and global missions (especially in Latin America and Africa) with which Mt Helm can be a missional partner.

The members of the SAIL Team¹⁷ are presently looking at all the data gathered regarding our church and its service to the larger community. They will present a more coherent list of recommendations to the Pastor no later than the end of November 2010.

¹⁷ Strategic Analysis and Implementation Leadership (SAIL) Team