

# Current Thoughts

*from Dwight's corner*

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The parties are over. The fireworks are spent. And the ball has dropped. 2008 is officially here.

Yes, the transition point from December 31st to January 1st is arbitrary (there is a sense in which every day is the beginning of a "new year"), but it can be useful to have such a shared "fixed" point. From that point we can pause, look to the past, reflect, and shape the future. At least we should. The alternatives are to live forever trapped in the past. Or a rootless and directionless life, defined entirely by the fleeting present. Or living disconnected and projected into a future that is forever postponed.

In a few days, the ministerial staff of the Great Rivers Region will have the first staff meeting of 2008. This is always an uncomfortable meeting. It is the meeting during which we evaluate and reflect on everything that was done (or not done!) in 2007, with the goal of learning to be more effective in 2008. This meeting even gets very personal. Goals that each of us wrote down and shared with our colleagues last year get dusted off and we are pointedly asked (or told) how we did. There is rejoicing, regret, and repentance.

The vision and purpose of the Region, as established by the Regional Ministry Board, are the touchstones for these painful discussions. The staff of the Region are driven by that vision: *healthy congregations engaged in effective Christian ministry locally and globally*. We are governed by that purpose: *to challenge, assist, represent and empower* the churches of the Great Rivers Region.

The common component in this vision and purpose is the church. The Region is about churches. As Baptists, we believe the church is the fundamental unit of mission and ministry. It is the church that is essential to the Kingdom of God. While the Region has churchly characteristics in that it was created by and for churches, it is not a church. It does not take the place or usurp the prerogatives of any church. Incidentally, that is why the Region does not baptize or ordain anyone.

Consequently, we will ask questions like: Did this contribute to healthier churches? Why or why not? Did this engage churches in mission and ministry locally and/or globally? Why or why not? Given our purpose, should we really be doing this, regardless of whether or not it feels good? Balanced against the realities of our resources (time, talents and treasure) is this the best use of those limited resources?

As you might imagine, the answers to these questions (indeed, the questions themselves) are complicated by the fact that there are 245 versions of what it means to be a healthy church; 245 expectations for ministry; 245 understandings of mission.

Our first staff meeting this year is especially critical because of our context. The world of 2008 is radically different from the world of 2004. That is true for both the Great Rivers Region and for each and every church in the Region. It has been my goal to be thoughtful and accurate in my

assessments of reality, and at the same time frank but hopeful in my reports to you. I have pushed the limits of confidentiality in sharing information.

Last year I concluded that we are in the midst of a "perfect storm," but asserted my confidence in the God who "rides the storm." I think the storm is mostly past by now. But like the Gulf Coast immediately after Katrina and Rita, there are still tornadoes and torrential rain. More than that, only now are we beginning to see the scope of the destruction. The landscape has changed dramatically. It will not recover quickly. Things will not easily return to normal. In fact, "normal" has been redefined.

But ***we are still here!*** More than that, ***our mission is still valid.***

The world may have changed. But God did not change between the glory of Solomon's Temple and the humiliation of the Exile. The same God can be present in both celebration and lament. The same God who exults in the multitude of cattle on a thousand hills stoops down to recover one insignificant sheep. God's greatness surpasses our human definitions of greatness because it encompasses beginning and ending, heights and depths, and everything in between. How great is our God, and how great is our privilege to serve!

This took a different turn as I was writing it. As I began my points were (1) annual review is important both organizationally and personally; and (2) review must be based on Godly vision and purpose. Each church and each pastor would do well to seriously engage such review.

Now, I covet your prayers as the ministerial staff of the Region move toward this critical meeting. And I pledge my prayers for you as you discern God's will for mission and ministry in your place at this time.

As part of my accountability to my colleagues, I will report my reading list at the upcoming meeting. Of the 40 books I read in 2007, here are five that I commend as worthy of your attention:

Ernest R. Flores **Tempted to Leave the Cross: Renewing the Call to Discipleship** Judson: Valley Forge PA, 2007.

Edward Gilbreath **Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical's Inside View of White Christianity** InterVarsity: Downers Grove IL, 2006.

N. Graham Standish **Becoming a Blessed Church: Forming a Church of Spiritual Purpose, Presence, and Power** Alban: Herndon VA, 2005.

Christopher J.H. Wright **The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative** InterVarsity: Downers Grove IL, 2006.

N.T. Wright **Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense** HarperOne: New York NY, 2001.



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