

Pastor's Annual Report for the year 2014

(adapted from the "State of the Church Address" delivered Sunday morning January 18, 2015, Pastor Brad Brandt)

There's a lot of talk these days about church growth, and what it takes for a church to grow. But consider this perspective, from God's Word...

"We will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head."

Ephesians 4:15

That's what Paul told the first century church at Ephesus in Ephesians 4:15. It's a wonderful truth for us to ponder as we reflect on the state of the church this morning.

We *will* grow up, and the Lord is intent on this happening "in all things." The NASB says, "We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ."

The Lord is using all kinds of things to grow us up in all kinds of necessary ways. He's using new ministry initiatives and existing ministries. He's using open doors and closed doors. And trials of all sorts, too.

In all these things, the Lord is growing us up into His likeness. For this He deserves our praise and thanks. And we're going to give it to Him.

That's what this State of the Church Address 2015 is all about. God's glory, and the encouragement we receive when He receives what He deserves. We're going to look at this text this morning, and then answer two questions it raises for us.

First, since Paul says that "in all things" (or "in every way" as the NASB and ESV put it) we will "grow up into Him," what are the ways God grew us up into Christ (which I take to mean *Christlikeness*) in 2014? Or to put it in a slightly different way, what are some of the evidences of WBC's growing up in the past year?

And then the second question, what initiatives will help us continue to grow up into the likeness of Christ in 2015? That is, what are we planning to do to help us individually and as a body grow up into our Head, the Lord Jesus?

Before we address those questions, let's dig into this important text for a few moments so we understand what it's saying. As you'll notice, there is no sermon outline to fill in this morning, for I want you simply to look at your text and listen. And then, rather than write, *ponder* what the Lord has been doing in our midst to fulfill this text. That will lead to celebration, and giving our Lord the glory for what He's been doing with us!

So let's unpack this verse. Ephesians 4:15 again says, "*We will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head.*"

You'll notice, first of all, that we've jumped into the middle of Paul's letter. In fact, we've jumped into the middle of this particular verse. Both backgrounds are vital to understanding what Paul's talking about. This is a statement of fact.

We will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head.

We—the followers of Christ

Will grow up—become mature

Into Him who is the Head. The Head? That, of course, is Christ.

So we, the followers of Christ, will grow up into the One who is our Head. In other words, we will become like Christ. Paul says the same thing in a slightly different way back in verses 12-13, when he says the body of Christ will be "built up" and become "mature", "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

That's what God's purpose is, to rescue spiritually-growth-stunted sinners, save them, place His Spirit in them, and them *grow them up* so they individually and collectively resemble His Son.

That's the message of the whole Bible. God's plan is to form a people who are conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29). It's why He chose Israel in the Old Testament, and then through Israel sent the Messiah, Jesus, into the world, who lived a perfect life, then died in the place of sinners on the cross, and then conquered death. Through faith in Christ and His work, the sinner is rescued by God and the transformation process begins.

And where does this happen, this *transformation* process? And not just where, but how does it happen? To answer those questions, we must look back.

First, we must look back to the first part of the letter. The letter begins this way back in 1:1, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus."

There's the answer to *where*. The transformation process happens in the church. In this case, it was in a local church in the city of Ephesus. "God...appointed him to be head over everything *for the church*," says Paul in 1:22. "Through the church," he says in 3:10. "To him be glory *in the church*," in 3:21. "Christ loved *the church* and gave himself up for her," says 5:25. "To present her to himself as a radiant church" is Christ's goal, according to 5:27.

So God's transformation process takes place in the church. That's where God intends to turn sinners into a people who resemble His matchless Son. *In the church*.

What makes this transformation process possible? It's not what the sinner brings to the table, for sure, but what God brings. Notice 1:2, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

That's what God has provided for the transformation process in the church. *Grace and peace*. That's what God gives hopeless sinners. Grace and peace. It comes to us from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

For this He deserves praise, which Paul gives Him in verse 3, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ."

We have all we need to become all God intends. What do we have? *Every spiritual blessing*. Where is this blessing? *In the heavenly realms*. Why there? Because that's where Christ is, in heaven.

But not just in heaven. He has sent His Spirit to indwell His people, so we can experience Christ's blessings (think of them as spiritual resources) in the context of Christ's people, the church.

Paul devotes the first three chapters of this letter to gaze at the subject of the church. He praises God for it in 1:3-14--the Father for designing it (3-6), the Son for giving His life for it (7-12), and the Holy Spirit for bringing it into existence (13-14). Then he prays for the church at the end of chapter one, and marvels at the identity of the church in chapters 2 & 3. The church is not just Jews, but Gentiles too, former enemies now united into one new man in Christ on the basis of His work at the cross.

That's where the action is, my friend. That's where God is fulfilling the plan He designed before creation, the plan to rescue sinners and transform them into the likeness of His Son. *In the church*.

I hope you love the church, for the Lord certainly does. It's the focal point of His plan to put His glory on display. And He intends it to be the focal point of our lives.

So there's the *where* question. God has chosen to transform lives *in the church*.

But next, *how*? How, in practical terms, does this transformation process occur? How does God change sinners?

Paul answers that question in the second half of the letter. Notice 4:6, “But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.” There’s the fuel again, *grace*. And we each have it, in Christ, the unmerited help of God for the accomplishing of God’s purpose.

But not just grace. We have grace *gifts*. Verse 8 says, “When he [that’s Christ] ascended on high, he...gave gifts to men.” Verse 11 elaborates, “It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers.” Christ gave spiritually gifted people to His church, to establish a foundation for it (through apostles and prophets), to launch it into unreached areas (through evangelists), and to provide for its ongoing maturation (through pastors and teachers).

And what purpose did Christ have for giving these gifted men to His church. They are sort of like the skeleton in a body. But the flesh is critical, and that’s the membership. He gave these gifted ministers of the Word, says verse 12, “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.” And not just built up in size, but, says verse 13, “become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

So what does a mature church look like? Paul tells us in the rest of the letter. We don’t look like the world, but look like Christ (4:17-24). We communicate like Christ (4:25-32). We love like Christ loved (5:1-2). We honor Christ in the way we treat sex (5:3-12), and time (5:15-16), and alcohol (5:18), and most importantly, in our relationships. We put Christ on display in the way we treat our spouses (5:22-33), our parents (6:1-3), our children (6:4), and those we work for and work under us (6:5-9).

And there’s one other component in this. If we’re going to fulfill God’s agenda and grow up into Christlikeness, we need to do a lot of what the first part of 4:15 says.

The end of the verse, again, says, “We will in all things grow up into him who is the Head.” But if that’s to happen, something must happen first. The first clause in verse 15 says, “Instead, *speaking the truth in love*, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head.”

If you want to know why we do what we do as a church, there is it. Our growth into Christlikeness depends on it. We speak truth to one another. And we do so in contexts in which we express our love for one another. As we speak truth in love, we will grow up into our Head and become like Him.

That’s the purpose of all our church services at WBC, whether it’s the morning worship, or deacon care groups, or Sunday School classes, or youth events. In every event we organize, our aim is to create opportunities to speak the truth in the context of loving relationships. Because when that happens, the Body will grow up into the likeness of our Head, Jesus Christ.

And that leads to something else, for when a body is maturing, it’s strong, and therefore can function as the Head intends, by reaching out and fulfilling its mission of making Christ and His gospel known to the world.

That, in essence, is the message of Ephesians. A glorious message, about a glorious plan, established by a glorious God, fulfilled in a glorious entity called the church, the body and bride of its glorious Head and Husband, Jesus the Christ!

Now let’s make this personal, and address two questions. The first...

What are the evidences of WBC growing up in 2014?

“We will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ.”

That's not just God's agenda for the church in Ephesus. It's for us, too, and every other local church. So there ought to be evidence that this spiritual growth is happening, that we resemble our Savior in observable ways. And, praise God, there is! He's been working with us to make that happen. Furthermore, to the degree it isn't happening, we know where we need to grow up in 2015.

From my perspective, here are six (and there are certainly more) evidences that WBC is growing up into Christ's likeness.

1. We see increasing evidence of love for the Word of God.

Jesus loved the Word. He quoted the Scriptures often. He lived according to the Scriptures. He said He came to fulfill the Scriptures. So if we His body are reflecting Him, we too will love the Word.

As your pastor, I see this love for the Word becoming greater and greater. When I first came to WBC in 1987, there were many wonderful things happening in the church. Lots of ministries and activities. In fact, it quickly became apparent to me that this was our reputation in the community. We were known for our programs. Programs for children, for teens, for senior citizens. Quality programs, too.

But in the past couple of decades the Lord has been transforming us, taking us deeper. We are increasingly known, not simply for what we do, but for what He has said and our love for it. And this is an evidence of the maturing process God is accomplishing.

I am encouraged by what's happening in our Sunday School classes. There's a digging into the Scriptures, and a commitment to help each other live out the Scriptures.

We saw this love for the Word in our Growth Groups, in the late winter and then again in the fall. We saw it in the ladies' Bible studies, and other discipleship group studies.

Speaking personally, it was a joy for me to open the Scriptures for you week after week in 2014. On Sunday mornings we continued our journey through the Gospel of John (chapters 13-16). In the Fall we did a couple of topical series: "We Have a Mission," and "How to Pray for People You Love: Learning about Prayer from Ephesians." We finished the year with, "When God Seems Distant," an exposition of the book of Esther.

On Sunday evenings we began the year with a series in Proverbs, "How to Be Wise in Life." In the June, "No Place Like the Church." In August, "Saved to Serve."

On Wednesday evenings our adult Bible studies included: the life of Abraham, the life of Barnabas, and "Investigating 1 Thessalonians Together."

But our love for the Word means we can't keep it to ourselves. So we're constantly looking for ways to make the Word known to others. Here's a few examples.

I think of our members who serve at Scioto Hills Camp, as well as CRADLE, ministries that exist to spread God's Word in the tri-state. Our biblical counseling team hosted our fifteenth year of CDT (counseling and discipleship training) in January through March, teaching another thirty plus individuals from a dozen plus area churches. Then in March, April, and May we were invited to do the CDT in weekend modules in Charleston, W.Va.

In February, our church hosted and I spoke at the Southern Ohio Pastors' Coalition.

In September you sent me to teach the Scriptures in Albania. At the invitation of missionaries Blair and Sue Alvidrez, Pastor Tim Pasma, Pastor Peter LaRuffa and I taught two groups of Albanian believers how to use the Scriptures to help people with the problems of life.

In October I was privileged to travel to southern California and deliver two workshops at the ACBC annual conference. The first, “Straight Talk about Overcoming Sexual Sin;” and the second, “How to Pray When the Pain Won’t Go Away: A Look at Psalm 13.”

And I am not the solo minister of the Word at WBC, for which I am grateful. The Lord has raised up a team of people from this church who proclaim the Scriptures. In the past year this included Scott Bruns, Dave Beam, Jack Branon, Pastor Matt, Aaron Cook, Gary Storm, and others.

It’s also a blessing to report that others took the Word abroad as well. Gary and Nancy Storm ministered in Slovakia, Bob Litteral in Kenya, India, and Papua New Guinea. To God’s glory, our brother Tapan published another book this year which helps Bengali speaking people learn English as an evangelistic tool.

Furthermore, we were edified together from the ministry of missionaries and speakers: including Todd & Christie Kincaid (ministering to people groups in Rome), Steve & Vicki Stairs (ABWE, leadership training in Africa), Bob Litteral, the Scioto Hills Camp summer staff, and Erin Wawro (Brazil)

So when I see this increasing love for the Word, I see evidence that God is growing us up as a body into the likeness of our Head, His Son. For which we praise Him!

Here’s another evidence...

2. *We are seeing the evidence of joyful giving.*

Jesus is the greatest giver ever, for He gave His life for us on the cross. If we are resembling Him, then, we too will exhibit joyful giving. And praise God, we did in 2014!

Let’s celebrate the numbers. The Lord gave us General Fund income of \$228,253 for the year (that’s a \$4367 weekly average).¹ That exceeded our budgeted need and was approximately \$4000 over our expenses for the year. That deserves a thanks be to God!

On top of this was the special Harvest Offering in November, with \$1595 given which became a love gift to Scioto Hills Camp to help with the walk-in freezer project. In light of the economy, this speaks to our God’s generosity and faithfulness, and also to the faithful and generous giving of so many in our congregation. It’s also an evidence that we’re growing up into our Head. Children love to get. Mature adults love to give.

And what’s the result of this giving? In the 2014 GF budget, the Lord gave us the privilege to increase the support of several of our missionaries who were under-supported. We also funded utilities, a director position, and custodial work for the Community Center, as well as remodeling it.

The giving in 2014 also resulted in important upgrades to our facility, such as a light retrofitting project for the entire building (thanks to Dennis DeCamp and a team of more than a dozen individuals), a roof replacement for the office wing, and some heating system work.

As we prepared the 2015 budget, we created a capital improvement account to cover unforeseen non-budgeted church expenses.

¹ For comparison purposes, here are the preceding years GF giving:

2014 – 228,253 (weekly 4367)

2013 - 226,507 (weekly 4355)

2012 – 206,588 (weekly 3973)

2011 – 199,633 (weekly 3839)

Thank you for your generous giving the past year, brothers and sisters. God enabled it, of course, and He used it to demonstrate that He's maturing us.

Here's another example.

3. We grew up through some losses.

Our Savior honored His Father in some significant losses, ultimately losing (or shall we say *giving*) His life. So for us to resemble Him, we too must experience some losses. And we did.

For starters, the Lord took some of our loved ones home to heaven. We said goodbye to four of our members in 2014 (Alverna Estep, Lucille Wilson, Edith McKittrick, Kay Collins) and one former member who had moved away (Dale Lupton).

Some of us said goodbye to family members this year. I did, with my mother going home to heaven back in May. It was out of that loss that we wrote the "Joy in the Sorrow" pamphlet that's on our website and continues to minister to other families facing loss.

We also experienced loss in a temporal sense to those the Lord moved from us to other places of service. In the summer Aaron & Laurie Cook, and their four children, as well as Patty Jelinek, moved to Cedarville. Aaron began his new ministry assignment as Director of Discipleship at Cedarville University.

It's another reminder of the special ministry the Lord has given this church. He doesn't typically send us people to keep, but to train and send out. Which necessitates we go through the experience of *loss*.

And, of course, there were other kinds of losses. We saw the loss of good health for some, and the loss of jobs, and so on. Speaking personally, this was a year of continuing physical challenges in my battles with chronic migraines (161 days with pain). But through the losses, there's been joy, Which is Christlike, joy in the losses. Which is another manifestation of how He is growing us up into our Head.

Another example...

4. We are growing up in our ability to show love for one another.

We love being together more and more. Before the services. After the services. In homes. For meals. For ministry projects.

We ministered to missionaries together. Erin Wawro came home on furlough this summer and fall, and we've enjoyed her ministry with us, and ours into her life.

The Kids Club carnival in May. A special New Year's Eve service, with food, games, fellowship, and the movie "God's Not Dead." Then there was VBS in July, and the Christmas program in December. In one sense, these are programs. But they're also opportunities for us to be together and express our love for one another.

We enjoyed fellowship with a sister church together. In October for Reformation Sunday we invited the Pleasant Green Baptist Church family to join us for an evening worship service, with communion, and a fellowship time that followed.

5. We are growing up in our ability to show practical care for the needy.

Christ cares for the needy. He is helping us do the same. What happens every Wednesday evening is a good example. Don and Connie Boggs work with a team to serve the Kids Club meal, and then a team of workers, under Scott Bruns' leadership, provide transportation and teach and model Christ for children from our church and the community. Pastor Matt and Bethany and the Youth Team did the same this year with teens. And the adults in the auditorium pray for these ministries, as well as opening God's Word together.

Then, of course, there's the ministry of the WBC Community Center. As most will recall, our Township trustees approached us and asked if we would be interested in

buying the community building across the street. The Lord used that request to help us think about the needs in our own community and the opportunity we have to make the gospel attractive to our community.

The Lord provided us with that facility without debt. The Community Center kickoff took place in March with a pancake breakfast for the community. Director Denise Hurley and her team surveyed individuals to find out potential needs they see which our community center could meet.

One was meeting space. In 2014, there were approximately 175 groups that reserved space in the facility for various events, including the Gideons, the Porter Township senior citizen's club, the Scouts, the Area Agency on Aging, and others.²

Other ministry possibilities have been prayerfully considered. Much time was spent traveling and observing what's others are doing in gospel-centered community service.

One specific ministry took place in the fall, a coat drive to help children who need a winter coat. Approximately 160 coats were donated and distributions were made to four local schools, in conjunction with requests from guidance counselors. There still are coats available if you know of a child in need.

I'll mention one more evidence...

-We are seeing increasing evidence of speaking the truth in love.

We have 168 members currently at WBC. Our weekly Sunday morning average attendance in 2014 was 125, on Sunday evening 64, on Wednesday evening 78. But 168 members who have said, by word and deed in going through the new members' process, "This is my church."

Now think of this. With 168 people comes 168 different perspectives, and with that comes some potential for differences.

Which is why the first part of Ephesians 4:15 is essential. "Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ." If we are going to grow up into the likeness of our Head, we must *speak the truth in love*.

As a church, we have a high view of biblical authority. We believe the Lord gave pastor-teachers to lead the church, and He holds them accountable to lead and equip the saints. And He holds the saints accountable to submit to this equipping ministry, and benefit from it, and then follow their leaders in the work of the ministry.

And when pastors lead, assisted in our context by godly deacons and trustees, and when saints do ministry, two things will happen. One, you'll see a lot of ministry, as 168 people put their gifts to work. And two, you'll see some potential "hallelujah moments," as we call them. Misunderstandings. Differences of opinion in how we do our ministries.

When that happens, there's potential for division. Which is what happens in so many churches, and when it does, it's an evidence of *immaturity*.

What's needed, says our text, is for the members of the body to speak the truth in love with one another, in order to find out what The Head wants. And when that happens, there is no division, rather a deepening bond between the members of the body.

And to God be the glory, that's exactly what's happening in increasing measure at WBC, a reflection of the maturing that's taking place.

What initiatives will help us continue to grow up in 2015?

² This includes 18 times with rental groups which donated \$1,975, as well as 157 times with non-profit groups.

Since our goal is to grow up into the resemblance of Christ, the question is simply, what's needed so we will more fully be like Christ, individually and as a church body? The areas where we need to grow should be our initiatives in 2015.

I want you to think about that question too. My perspective is certainly limited. If you see an area where you think we need to grow up together, pray about it, and seek to facilitate it.

But here's what I see, four observations, which become four initiatives.

1. *We don't have the same love for the lost that our Savior did.*

I know I don't. But I need to. *We* need to. So that must be an initiative for us, a constant initiative. Our mission is to make Christ known and make disciples of the lost

Your perspective is vital. What did you see? What are ways we can more effectively reach the lost? How can we get more lines in the water?

2. *We don't come out of our comfort zones to meet needs as much as He did.*

Jesus was constantly denying Himself to ministry to others. So must we. He said no to His own interests to meet the needs of others. So must we.

And let me start here. Perhaps the Lord wants to take you out of your comfort zone so that you come to know His Son as your personal Lord and Savior. Why not today? Or perhaps its taking steps to become an active member and participant in this local church. Why not now? Our next new members class begins a week from today.

3. *We don't have the willingness to suffer selflessly as He had.*

Jesus embraced His Father's will for Him, which involved suffering. We can't escape it, especially in a world that's growing increasingly hostile to Christ-followers. By God's grace, let's choose to joyfully walk the paths of suffering He may lay before us.

4. *We don't give attention to prayer as much as Jesus did.*

Jesus prayed a lot. So must we, even more than we've done in the past. Let's give even more fervent attention to praying without ceasing.

So this is what we need in 2015, these four initiatives. They will help us grow up into the likeness of our Head. To show we love the lost as Jesus did. To leave our comfort zones to meet needs as Jesus did, starting with our brothers and sisters. To embrace suffering as Jesus did. And to give more attention to prayer, as Jesus did.

To God be the glory!