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# LAKE SIDE CHURCH of Chicago

† transforming lives † transforming our world for Christ

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## The **LAMPLIGHTER**



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Rev Stan Wiedeman, Sr Pastor   Rev Dave Uchizono, Assoc Pastor   Rev Mitsuo Suzuki, Japanese-Speaking Pastor  
3939 W Howard St, Skokie IL 60076   Ph: 847.763.9720   Website: [www.lakesidechurchofchicago.org](http://www.lakesidechurchofchicago.org)   Email: [lakesidechurchofchicago@yahoo.com](mailto:lakesidechurchofchicago@yahoo.com)

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### THE HEART OF DOING CHURCH

The Alpha Course has generated substantial excitement at our church this year. By the numbers, we experienced only a modest response to our first course last spring. Our second course, beginning this Friday, has attracted only a small group again.

But the size is secondary to the impact. We are witnessing the work of the Holy Spirit in a fresh way as we try to reach out to people who matter to us. People wrestling with some of the bigger questions of life (Why am I here? What does all this mean? Is there more to life than this?) are stepping into a group of strangers to explore the Christian answer to these questions.

These strangers are enjoying community together around their questions and uncertainties. They listen to a short message about one aspect of the Christian message. A trained leader then guides them through an open discussion, where people let down their defenses and remove their masks in a safe environment. Over the course of ten weeks, the community evolves and lives are changed.

Perhaps Alpha has provided us with a tangible expression of the church's real mission. This mission is easily lost in the daily operation of church life. We gradually allow personal issues, individual growth and organizational matters crowd out the real compelling spirit of the church's mission. And what is that mission?

Michael Craven answers that question in a recent article, "The Church in Post-Christendom: What is the Good News (Part 2)." A portion of that article follows.

*"Under the institutionalized church-centric model, the church's de facto mission was focused mostly on recruiting "members" through evangelism while "mission" was understood to be a program of the church. The goal or mission really settled on the institutional maintenance of the local church, whose success or failure was inevitably, and I dare say exclusively, measured by the number of members. However, as I pointed out earlier, "the church of Jesus Christ is not the purpose or goal of the gospel, but rather its instrument and witness." This brings us to our second question: What exactly is the church's mission?*

*"In order to answer this question, we must first accurately define the gospel or "good news." I say accurately because I think many Christians, particularly in our highly individualized culture, have come to view the gospel as simply the personal plan of salvation. The modern emphasis tends toward "fixing the sin problem" in terms that are entirely personal. However, the Scriptures speak in a much more comprehensive way that goes beyond the private version of the gospel that we have come to know in the West.*

*"Matthew records the beginning of Jesus' ministry and message with these words, "Jesus began to preach and to say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Matt. 4:17). In Matthew 24:14 Jesus himself describes the gospel in relation to "the kingdom" when he says "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world...." Matthew describes Jesus' ministry as follows: "And Jesus went about all Galilee ... preaching the gospel of the kingdom..." (4:23). (Emphasis mine; NKJV.)*

*"In fact, the New Testament records Jesus mentioning the kingdom 108 times while only referring to being born again once. This single occurrence took place during his conversation with Nicodemus when he was explaining the spiritual transformation that must occur in order to see the kingdom of God.*

*"As Norman Perrin points out in his book Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus, "The central aspect of the teaching of Jesus was that concerning the Kingdom of God. Of this there can be no doubt.... Jesus appeared as one who proclaimed the Kingdom; all else in his message and ministry serves a function in relation to that proclamation and derives its meaning from it."*

*"Clearly, by his own words and the testimony of the apostles, Jesus was preaching the good news that through him God's reign has come. The gospel or good news is the fact that in Christ the reign of God is at hand and is now breaking into the world. His kingdom, which has come, continues to come forth and will be fully consummated on the day of Christ's return. This is the good news, which offers both a future and present hope to sinners and the whole of God's creation!*

*"It is the reign of God—this full gospel—that the church is sent into the world to bring forth as God's instrument, and to which it bears witness in its life and community. The reign of God applies to the whole of creation, including society and culture, in which the church demonstrates life under the reign of God within a distinct community, serves the world through compassion and mercy, and proclaims the risen Christ as the only means by which one may enter the kingdom of God."*

Jesus does not build his Church as an institution to serve its members. He builds his church as a mobile tactical unit, displaying and dispensing the kingdom to the world breathing in darkness. By doing mission as a community through the Alpha Course, we are discovering the heart of doing church.

*Pastor Stan*