

Dr. Steven D. Johnson II

Senior Pastor

Hope City Church

“Choosing to Change: A Pastoral Letter & Vision for the Future”

August 31, 2022

Dear Members, Friends & Supporters of Hope City Church:

For centuries, theologians and biblical scholars have sought to describe in some level of specificity the nature or the essence of God. Drawing upon a full gamut of resources such as the Holy Scriptures themselves, notable figures throughout church history, and applicable material within philosophical and classical literature, some of these scholars have noted that God – in God’s truest form – is gracious, loving, caring, merciful, kind, compassionate, forgiving, and *unchanging*. The later adjective, *unchanging*, is critical for reflection because it denotes a God who, while the world moves and humanity constantly evolves, never changes. God then at God’s core is constant, immovable, steadfast, and does not blow with the wind, so to speak.

While God is unchanging, God does participate in change as it pertains to God’s encounters with humanity. Said another, God does not change, but in God’s relationship with humanity, God brings about, or will’s, change. Apt illustrations of these changes include when God started over in the flood narrative, when God sent Moses to set the Israelites free, when God gave the world Jesus Christ, and when Jesus turned water into wine.

You are reading this because God has willed a change. And there are three changes that I want to share with you: **God Moves. God Changes. God Reimagines.**

GOD MOVES

“Just as you cannot understand the path of the wind or the mystery of a tiny baby growing in its mother’s womb, so you cannot understand the activity of God, who does all things.”

Ecclesiastes 11:5

My immediate family and I now live in Houston, Texas. In fact, as I pen this note, I am writing while surrounded by plush green shrubs and tall oak trees, hearing rain cascade from the heavens above. As most of you know, I am a bi-vocational pastor, which for me means that while I am an active minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I am also a businessman, specializing in real estate development. I have taken on a new employment opportunity in Houston which helps me improve my family’s quality of life quite considerably. While some may think this was a personal decision, the reality is that this was a God thing – God moved us to another state so that we could begin our next chapter, a chapter that the Lord has written. My wife and my children are ecstatic to be here, and we’ve enjoyed watching and experiencing this new season unfold for us.

This news may come as a surprise to a few of you because most of you likely already know. Some of you may have certain opinions related to this, and you may even think that I should have forewarned you or alerted you of some sort. The simple explanation is that this was a decision for me and my family, and while I love you, I answer only to God.

I've seen some of you make similar personal decisions, whether it be divorce, marriage, job transitions, counseling options, business ideas, or medical treatment. The reality is that I have always sought to support you and your family as you made tough decisions, or as tough decisions were made for you by God.

God moves as God sees fit. Our job is to be obedient. I am proud to say I've been obedient.

GOD CHANGES

“See, God is doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?” Isaiah 43:19

Since the pandemic arrived, on many occasions one of the dynamics that I've spoken and written about is that the pandemic would initiate global and domestic change in every industry and sector of society. Businesses of all sizes have had to adjust strategies and operational plans, tweaking everything from hiring decisions, internal processes, marketing, and procurement, to employee benefits such as remote work, health care offerings, and wages. Non-profit entities have not been immune to the need to change up strategy, and many, if not most, have been forced to change to survive.

Many churches have had to adjust as well throughout the course of the pandemic. Having witnessed the flexibility of streaming services through online platforms, some churches have elected to implement the virtual model permanently, as this virtual model reduces operating overhead and potentially allows for ministry expansion into territories and areas unfathomable just a few years before. Other churches have decided to maintain in-person attendance, despite any associated risk, and while some have seen their weekly attendance climb back to pre-pandemic levels, others are still trying to regain the attendance they had before the pandemic struck.

Back in January 2021, I did a message series using “Shift” as a theme, and the purpose was to signal that while some may fear shifts, transitions and change, God uses those same dynamics and movements to accomplish God's will for our lives. To this end, for people of God, shifts should not be feared, but welcomed and courageously embraced, knowing that God has ordered the steps of the Righteous Ones.

I've pastored this church for about 10 years – almost a decade – and each year has brought about change. Admittedly, some changes were better than others. Like all things, there were good times and bad times, ups and downs. But through it all, my effort has never wavered. Make no mistake about it, my heart has always been right here in this church! I've given all that I could, always paid my tithes, and not once, *not once*, exploited the church for any personal or material benefit. For a while, I even served without receiving any kind of paycheck or stipend! I've painted walls, cleaned toilets, vacuumed carpets, changed light fixtures, climbed the attic, ran electrical wires,

and served as point man on the setup and breakdown crew. Often, I had to do some of this work at the church alone, just me and God, working, working, working.

But during the last few years particularly, our church has had a challenging run. Not only did the pandemic force us to close our doors, but our weekly tithes and offerings remained remarkably, dishearteningly low.

Can you believe that on some Sundays over the last few years, our weekly offering barely cracked the \$200 threshold? Can you also believe that some of the individuals who called themselves members of our church and “ride or die” folks, barely gave anything to the church they supposedly loved? Can you also believe that some of the people who gave the most money to our church, were not even members of our church? Can you also believe that on more than a couple Sunday mornings, we had, on average, 10 congregants in worship, and yet we kept holding worship services?

I know we are living in the age of Fake News, but those are facts that I can prove!

On January 30, 2022, several of you were personally invited to a special vision casting session in which I described and defined in detail a plan to transition our church to a more virtual ministry approach using online and television platforms as the primary mediums of engagement and evangelism. I shared an elaborate PowerPoint presentation detailing this vision, explaining a pivot coming in Spring 2022, a move towards television production and an effort to enhance and expand our internal capabilities and infrastructure. The purpose of this overall shift was to help transition the church towards a more sustainable future, as it became clear that the church was hanging on by a thread. As I recall, I addressed questions and comments, before finally soliciting financial support for the moves I thought would be to the church’s advantage, including, but not limited to, transitioning to a virtual format, investing in social media, expanding our online target audience, and establishing ministry hubs in select cities and regions.

The response to this vision casting session was favorable at the time, and several individuals made significant financial contributions to these efforts. As of date, much of the work we set out is ongoing, as God helps us reshape these efforts.

GOD REIMAGINES

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Isaiah 55:8 – 9

The above scripture makes it undoubtedly clear that not only is God far superior that we are in intellect, but God’s very thoughts are different than those of humankind. While we can pray and tarry and fast and read and seek to be holy, we can never think like God and behave like God. That said, we must exhibit a deep humility when it comes to claiming to know the moves of God and the exact thoughts of God. The best we can possibly due is to be open to God moving through the Holy Spirit, praying that God guides us strategically to where God wants each of us to be, according to His will.

Despite what we may think, I am led to believe that God reimagines this church!

Part of that reimagination, I've come to believe, is finding ways where the best of the church's storied legacy can be preserved, while recognizing, accepting, and coming to terms with the fact that the church as it stood just a few months ago could not have possibly survived much longer. Reimagining would mean exploring ways to modernize the church while cherishing its roots, using its past to propel it towards the future.

And that's the mission we are currently on; the vision we are pursuing.

The church's next steps consist of the following: continuing to build our online presence, preparing, and ultimately planting a ministry location here in Houston, recruiting a new host of volunteers to serve in various capacities, revamping our social media platforms, exploring prudent and economically feasible options for the building in San Bernardino, including disposition or continued rental income, and boosting our capital campaign initiatives. Aligning with this reimagining theme, we are also changing our corporate ministry name to "For You Church," which derives its name from the following ministry focus: We are a ministry designed with "You" in mind and encourage you to engage and encounter God any way you see fit, whether through YouTube, in person services, weekly devotionals, television, or social media.

Here's a snippet of some language bringing vision and identity to "For You Church" as the Lord leads us in crafting and developing:

The vision of For You Church is to operate a personalized ministry model that places a premium on people's experience with God however and wherever they are located. Recognizing that "one size does not fit all," this personalized ministry model embraces innovative ways to share the Gospel of Christ in a technologically savvy world. The church will exist between the verses of Scripture and the Metaverse, between social events and social media. It acknowledges that there is no limit to where the Omnipresent God dwells. Thus, the ministry will invest as much if not more in its online worship experiences as it does in-person services. The ministry operations will stretch across the internet and serve local neighborhoods and communities. The ministry's vibrancy, dexterity, and fluidity create a ministry footprint that can adjust to multiple headwinds and tailwinds, thereby making it more sustainable in the long-term.

For You Church is carefully designed to meet imperfect people where they are, how they are. It's not a perfect church, because there is no such thing as a perfect church. But it is a place where all are invited and encouraged to grow, learn about Christ, lean on God, and be inspired and empowered to live Spirit-filled lives.

For You Church is a place of hope. Of refuge. Of inspiration. Of renewal. Of joy. Of Worship. Of Growth.

It seeks to be different yet traditional. Worldly, yet holy. Heavenly focused with an earthly pragmatism. It's biblically based, spiritually grounded, and Spirit-led.

It's designed for the millennial, the Gen Z, the Baby Boomer, and all in between. It's designed for YOU.

For You Church is the church reimagined; it is Hope City Church as a full revamp and redirection. It is the bridge between what has been and what is becoming, all for the glory of God.

Brothers and sisters, to be honest, sometimes I wonder why God sent me to pastor this church. I wonder why I succeeded my father, Steven Johnson Sr., who succeeded his father, Hardy Johnson Sr.

Slowly it's becoming clearer to me. I was sent for such a time as this: to shepherd the church through a period of its wind down in San Bernardino; to lead the church through a global pandemic; to try to teach and embody courage, determination, strength and tenacity; to leave in my wake a sense of adventure, of possibilities, of exploration; to refuse to settle and refuse to quit; to grow thicker skin; and to continue building the Johnson family's legacy in Texas, in a place and region of our origins, where our story first began to unfold.

By no design of my own, God turned the last five months or so into a sabbatical of sorts. During this time, I have settled into my new gigs in H-Town, rested a small bit, took a much-needed break from preaching weekly, and played and laughed with my kids. I've also consumed a lot of great food. And my kids have now settled into their new schools here, with activities and routines ready to go.

I'm gearing up for the next chapter of my ministry because I have embraced the fact that God has reimagined some things for me.

And I invite you to reimagine with me. Reimagine your life, your family's life. Reimagine what it truly means to be the church, that's its not about a building but about people. Reimagine your preconceived notions of what could and could not be done, how they should be done, and why they should be done. Commit yourself to reimagine the future.

As I conclude, I know that some of you have already moved on to other local ministries. And that's great news! My hope is that you've found a good Bible-based church that focuses more on God and less on pastors. Some of you may have a wait and see approach, not knowing what the future holds. To you, I exhort you to sincerely pray for direction. To those few who wish to remain with our ministry, we welcome you into "For You Church," and trust and expect you to be faithful. You will hear more in the coming days and weeks as the church expands and reaches new territory for God. In the meantime, our services will continue online, and in a few short weeks we'll be broadcasting new messages and sermon series.

I ask for your prayers and good wishes. It may be a while before I see some of you again. Know that I'll be praying for you too.

All of my contact information is the same. You can always reach out to me directly via email at sdji1867@gmail.com, or 909-534-2260.

I sincerely do love and cherish each of you with the love of Christ. May God continue to bless you and your family, answer your prayers according to God's will, open doors for you, and use you for His glory.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dr. Steven D. Johnson II". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the beginning and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Dr. Steven D. Johnson II
Senior Pastor
For You Church
Houston, Texas