

**ALL THE PLACES TO GO**

**JOHN ORTBERG**

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Last May, we had a gathering for anybody who wanted to come, and we talked about our sense of where God is leading MPPC as a church. This weekend is devoted to that vision. We're going to begin with a reading from Paul's letter to the church at Colosse:

*Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful; and pray for us too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ for which I am in chains; pray that I may proclaim it clearly as I should.* (Colossians 4:2-4)

It's the image of an "Open Door" that we are going to focus on. Paul loved this image. He wrote to the church at Corinth:

**Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, I found the Lord had opened the door for me.** (2 Corinthians 2:12)

*A great door for effective work is opened for you, and there are many who oppose me.* (1 Corinthians 16:9)

There is a spirit of tenacity behind this Open Door image. Psychologists say that you can divide the world into two kinds of people: people who love *Star Trek* and people who hate *Star Trek*. Those of you who love *Star Trek* will remember that every show began with this tag line: "Only going where no man has gone before." That's Paul. He is a Pioneer. One thing that, to me, is very striking and moving is that when Paul writes to the Colossians, he is in chains. He is a prisoner of the Roman Empire. He is on a road that will lead to beating, suffering and death, and he knows it. He says, "Pray for me."

How would you pray if that were you in prison? I would ask that I be set free. I would pray that the chains would be taken off. I would pray that the persecution would stop. Paul asked for none of this.

Pray for open doors. This is a picture of opportunity: Pray that the Gospel would be spread, that right now where a door is closed—in someone's heart, in some place—that the door would be open, and that I would boldly go through it.

The Gospel has been spreading for 2000 years, because God opened doors. It happens in the most amazing places.

Wednesday night, Nancy couldn't sleep so she got up. It was 1:00 AM. She came back to bed at 2:30 and she was all excited. I asked her why she was so excited, and she told me,

Oprah is on. They're doing *Oprah* reruns at 1:00 in the morning, and that's good news!

Oprah was interviewing people, and one of them was Mary J. Blige. Some of you may know who she is. She's a Hip-Hop star...top of the charts...famous and making a lot of money. She told Oprah

the story of her life. She'd been drinking too much and partying too much. She was empty inside. A man who knew her quite well asked her,

Why are you living this way?

That question stopped her. They started to talk about God. Then she said to Oprah, on nationwide TV,

I've become a Christian. I'm following Jesus Christ. It's changed the trajectory of my whole life.

Isn't that unbelievable? He still does this!

That's why Paul says:

*I'm not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.* (Romans 1:16)

So he asks,

Pray that I may proclaim it clearly when I'm facing pressure—when I'm under opposition—when I've got difficulties. Pray that I won't lose my nerve, won't water it down, won't back away, won't blur it, won't lose the sense of urgency that drives me on. Pray that I will pay whatever price needs to be paid. Open door. Open door. Open door.

Why? Because—and this is a real important image—only God can open a door to the human heart. Many of us in this room have shared this experience.

In the Book of Acts we are told that one day Paul and Barnabas gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them, and described how He had

*Opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.* (Acts 14:27)

We're going to look at this in the weeks to come. This is an unbelievable thing, and something that only God can do. We're told in the Scripture that what God opens, nobody can shut. God says to the church, *See,*

*I have placed before you an open door no one can shut.* (Revelation 3:7-8)

Our job then is to pray and to discern. Jesus said,

*Seek and you shall find; knock and the door shall be opened.* (Matthew 7:7)

Then, go through the door.

One hundred and thirty three years ago, there was a little group of people who believed that God was opening a door in Menlo Park, California. Menlo Park Presbyterian Church was started. All of our lives

are touched by the acts of that group of people. It wasn't an easy undertaking. Let me show you a little "Church Growth Graph," so that you can know about the history of our church.

In 1873, thirteen people founded MPPC. Not many people to start a church. For 60 years they met, they gathered, they prayed, they taught. Sixty years later, do you know how many people there were at our church? Thirteen people. That's not huge church growth! It would have been really easy to close the place down, but they had a sense that closing was not God's will. After sixty years, things started to happen. People were being reached for Christ. The Holy Spirit was at work in this church.

Every week, when you come in, you're given a bulletin that tells you about the service, and a program that you can read...during dull stretches in sermons. That program is called *The Pioneer*. Let me tell you why it's called *The Pioneer*. When the first issue came out in September 1952, it said:

*We chose the word 'pioneer,' because that word defines our great objective as a church to pioneer for the Kingdom of God and to win new areas of mankind to God with the same courage and vision and faith as the pioneers of old.*

When you see that word "Pioneer," it's not a reference to covered wagons in the past; it's about a group of people who had a pioneering vision for the future for God. "We will go through open doors. We will be pioneers. We will follow the One who Scripture says

***"Became the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."*** (Hebrews 12:2)

We will be the "Church of the Pioneer." And it happened.

In the case of most churches, if there is a change over time, it is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ becomes more blurred, gets watered down and loses focus. But here at MPPC, it has been just the other way around. One day, a man named Cary Weisiger came and served as pastor here. Later, a man named Walt Gerber came and served as pastor. And the Gospel continued to become more and more clear, burning brighter, and becoming more urgent.

I was in Atlanta a couple of weeks ago at a meeting of pastors of Presbyterian churches who are seeking to gain ground for Christ. One of those pastors was a man named Scott Farmer; another was Scott Dudley; another was Doug Ferguson. All of them are part of the legacy of this church. Earlier Nancy and I were in Hawaii serving at a church pastored by Dan Chun who used to be here. We went over to Hawaii, because...we believe that some people need to serve Jesus in Hawaii...

You may know about this. Dan pastors a church that has been in Honolulu for years and years, and they believed that God was opening a door. They sold the church building where they had been for a long, long time and bought a golf course. They have taken over about 200 acres. It is one of the most staggeringly beautiful sites I have ever seen. Three acres are already under roof! They sold what they had and prayed and stretched for the additional money. They met for the first time last month on a Sunday. Imagine that! A Presbyterian church...meeting at a golf course. I think it's brilliant! If you want to reach the maximum number of pagan sinners per square foot, a golf course is the perfect place to do that. It's not been an easy thing to do, so pray for Dan as they move out in faith.

Now, this is our day. This is our home. This is where God has placed us. I don't believe the sheer spiritual vacuum in the San Francisco Bay Area has ever been bigger than it is right now. So many people. So accomplished financially, educationally, vocationally, socially artistically and spiritually lost. Confusion, emptiness, hollowness.

MPPC did a mission study a few years ago. The results agreed with a number of other studies that were done. About 93% of the Bay Area residents are not a part of any church, not a part of a community of faith, not a part of a place where they can make a commitment to Jesus Christ and study His Word and grow. A number of years ago, *Newsweek Magazine* had an article that said

The western shore of the Bay Area is the least Christian, least church area in America.

That's where we live. That's the place that God has given us. Other people have other days and other places. This is our day, and this is our place. So we have been praying. Our Elders and teams have been meeting, and we want to tell you this weekend about a door that we think God is opening for MPPC.

There are two parts to this strategy that we are calling "Open Doors." A couple of years ago, we launched a service called the *11:05 Café*. It provided a way to open additional space at an optimal time and to involve more teams of people in ministry. There was live worship and a message there by video. We didn't know if it would work or not, but it filled up immediately. We started right across the way in the Garden Court.

To get a little more space, we moved it down to 700 Santa Cruz Avenue. By the way, before MPPC met here at 950 Santa Cruz Avenue where we are now, do you know where it used to meet? 700 Santa Cruz! We have reclaimed that space. The new venue was filled to overflowing and violated fire codes every week. So this weekend, there is a *9:32 Café* being launched. To everyone who has been praying, planning, serving, volunteering to make it happen,

Way to go!

The first part of the Open Door strategy is this: What if we use the same technology and plan that we used with the *Café's* to launch an MPPC site maybe 20-30 minutes to the north of Menlo Park and another 20-30 minutes to the south? The idea is that we would take 300 or so "pioneers" to give critical mass to the new sites. We already have members who live in these areas. We would have the same program that we have here: same teaching, same Gospel, live worship, children's ministries like Shepherd's Village. MPPC would continue to be one church, one body, one mission, but with multiple locations that would enable us to spread out and reach the Bay.

This idea—this multi-site strategy—is being used by hundreds of churches. This is, I believe, the most exciting time to be a church in many centuries. There are a few reasons why so many churches are considering this strategy. For one thing, it increases people's engagement and spiritual growth. Here's how this works:

At the church where I used to serve in Chicago, we did a survey that has been replicated many times. We found that if people lived twenty minutes or more away from the campus where they attended church, their involvement would go down in pretty much every area of the life of faith: participating in regular worship, involvement in small groups, learning about spiritual gifts and using them in service, going on

the adventure of evangelism, giving. You could chart it. The farther away they lived from the campus, the less likely it was that they would participate in any of those activities. But when they have a site that is close by, all of that would turn around and increase.

Additionally, the multi-site strategy gives people an increased opportunity for leadership and ministry. This is important. I believe that at MPPC, speaking on a human level, our number one resource is people. I've said this before: I have never ever seen a church that has been blessed with the levels of giftedness and resources that God has given this church. I have never seen anything like it! And this weekend or this year, God is going to tap some of you on the shoulder and say,

I want you to go on this adventure. I want you to pioneer something for Me.

If we do not give opportunities for pioneers to make a difference at a church like this, they will go somewhere else, and that energy will go to making more money or to some kind of civic organization. That energy might go to a good cause, but this presents an opportunity to unleash “Kingdom Entrepreneurship.”

Multi-site strategy allows our church to reach more people without getting more congested. At the time we did the mission study several years ago, does anyone remember the number one complaint about our church? Parking problems and size. Yes, people felt that the congregation was too big. With the opening of multiple sites, we have a chance to reach more people for Jesus Christ, but with less “big-ness”—less congestion.

We've been working with a consultant named Jim Tomalin, who is an expert on multi-sites. Jim was having a conversation with Max Lucado, the well-known pastor and author. Max has a church in San Antonio, and they were looking at buying a campus and building a big, new sanctuary. It was going to cost a ton of money. In the interim, they stumbled onto this multi-site concept. They began to think about establishing several sites and not spending all the money.

Max said to Jim,

Now we don't know what to do. Should we build a big, new sanctuary, or should we launch a bunch of sites?

I loved the way that Jim answered the question. He said,

Max, it depends. Do you want to be an elephant or do you want to be a virus?

I think it would be kind of cool to be a virus and just infiltrate. Viruses are contagious and infectious.

Another thing about the multi-site idea is it increases the chances of a site being effective. We know that church planting is crucial to reach unchurched people. An article in a recent issue of *Outreach Magazine* said that if current trends continue, by the year 2050 only 11% of Americans will attend church on a regular basis. We know that planting churches is the fastest way to reach people. But we also know that 80% of all new church plants die within the first five years. Kind of like new business starts. And the majority of the rest of new church plants never get out of survival mode, because they are not known, are generally under-resourced, and they're almost always under-staffed.

Multi-sites give us a chance to get a critical mass of people—our “pioneers”—who will have resources to provide great ministries for worship, for children, for small groups and so on. They can take advantage of one of our best assets, which is that we are known in the Bay Area. MPPC has a name and a reputation in the Bay Area and has built trust.

Just to picture what this might look like, take a look at this map. There is MPPC. Right across the street is Peet’s Coffee. If you were to have a circle with a four-mile diameter, about 1500 people who currently attend MPPC live within that circle. That’s about 2% of the total population of people who actually live within that circle. 90% of those people are not involved in a church at all, according to statistics.

Here’s the vision: What if we were able to plant a site to the north and a site to the south where we could provide a similar ministry? What if we could reach 2% of the people who live in a similar circle around the site to the north and in a similar circle around the site to the south? That’s a huge challenge! But if we were able to do that, it would mean reaching thousands of people for Jesus Christ who are not being reached right now. If God could open doors up and down this Bay...oh my goodness! Ten or twenty years ago, this would not have been possible.

There’s another part of the Open Door idea. One part is that we do the multi-site thing and we get some “Pioneers” who are willing to go off and launch the new locations. But the second part of the “Open Door” idea is that we take a fresh look at what God is calling us to do right here, on our Menlo Park campus. The last thing we want is for all the pioneer spirit to go off to the north and the south and be left with just “settlers.” The real adventure is in discovery of the doors that God is opening for every individual. This is not an organizational issue. There are things that as a corporate community we need to do, but this is just about the adventure that awaits every Christ-follower.

God every day opens doors.

I got a note last week from Gordon Pilcher. Many of you know Gordon. He sings in the choir. He was telling me about a time recently when he was on a plane. There was a young man who had recently graduated from high school and was visiting colleges. Gordon started talking to him. The boy was from Atlanta. His family was not involved in any church. He told Gordon,

My dad is an atheist, and I’m an atheist.

Gordon Pilcher looked this kid in the eye and said,

Son, we have four and one-half hours to do something about that!

Gordon pulled his Bible down from the overhead bin and for the next hour and a half, he said,

I explained my faith from creation to the birth, death and resurrection of our Lord, and he sat there and listened.

Like where else was he going to go? Gordon just walked him through, and talked about the difference that Jesus made in his own life, and when they got to the end he said,

I wish I had a Bible that I could give to you.

The young man answered,

We have three of them at home. I've never read one.

Then Gordon looked him in the eye and said,

Son, I want you to promise me that you will go and read the Bible.

I will.

God is opening a door on a plane...on *Oprah*...in 1873...in the Acts 2 church...and God is still opening doors. God wants to tap every one of us on the shoulder. This is who we are. It's in our DNA. We are the "Church of the Pioneers." That's the One that we follow.

We want to ask ourselves: How can we help every Christian who is here to become an "Open Door Follower of Jesus?" There are teams who are looking for answers to questions like: What is the discipleship path that can help us make it clear how to open ourselves up to the transforming power of God? We have a lot of great ministry and many great programs, but it's not easy for someone who comes in and decides to become a Christ-follower. How does Membership fit in? Where do they go? How do we make the path clear for them? There's a team of people who are looking at this issue.

How do we do Leadership Development as a church? That's absolutely crucial. We have been blessed with a people resource. How do we call that resource to come forward? This is something we're going to be discussing at the Family of God Conference this fall. How do we maximize this campus and the facilities that we have right here? That's a big, big question. How do we position ourselves for Children's Ministries and for Student Ministries in the future? The church is doing very exciting things in those areas.

These are the two primary ideas: the "Multi-Site Open Doors" and then the "Open Doors" right here at 950 Santa Cruz. Charley Scandlyn, who has been a fabulous leader on our staff for many years, is going to lead the Multi-Site charge. He's already putting a team together. Then Alan Phipps is going to lead the renovation project of our campus right here. Alan was at a point in life where he could easily have retired and taken it easy. He thought that was in the cards, and that was NOT what is in the cards. That's going to be good news for us in the church. Alan is an avid hunter, so this is going to be good news for deer and birds and rabbits all over northern California.

Those teams are just getting started. This year is a "Lay the Foundation" year for next year when we start to go through the Door.

I want to take a moment to answer a very important question that many of you may be asking this weekend. Why do we do this? This is going to involve risk and change and that could be scary. I know, in a world that is already so chaotic, it could be tempting to think:

I want to have a church that is an oasis against change where I can know it will always feel the same.

I get that.

But we are the “Church of the Pioneers.” That’s who we are. We follow the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith who went to the Cross.” We follow men and women like Paul, who sat in a prison cell with chains around him and prayed

not “God, get me out of here,”

not “God make me free,”

not “God, protect me from the chaos of the world out there and make my life more stable,”

but “God,

Open a door.

Open a door! I’ll go through it! I’ll be in chains!

Open a door.”

That’s who we are.

We are the Church of the Pioneers.

The unspoken thought behind the question “Why are we doing this?” may really be about “Is this just about making our church bigger, so that the leaders of the church can feel better about themselves? If that’s the deal, let’s just get them good therapy. It would be a lot cheaper.” That’s always a fair question.

Speaking as one of the members of the leadership community here, I can say that leaders are very fallen and very human people.

“Don’t we have enough people already?”

There are those who are already part of this church who think,

“Shouldn’t somebody else do something? Why should we do this?”

It will take a moment to answer that. I’d like you to do something first, if you would. Take out your wallet or your purse. I’m not going to ask for an offering for Open Door, so don’t worry about that. In addition to money and cards, people often have pictures in their wallets. Would you show those pictures to the person next to you and tell them why you carry them around? OK.

Now, look at your picture for a moment. Do you have anyone in those pictures about whose spiritual life you have concerns? Is anybody in one of those pictures at a point where things are sort of shaky between them and God? If you do, I’ll tell you something. You hope that somebody in this world will care for that person. You hope that somebody in their world is going to notice them and pray for them and do something to reach out to them. You hope somebody will stand near the door for that person. You hope that some church, some place in their world is not content that things are going OK, but that they will be creative, and they will have compassion, and they will be generous, and they will take risks, and they will help that person that you love find the door to God.



Why would we look at doing something like this? Because everybody that you see, is someone's son or daughter. Behind every door that you drive past when you drive up and down this Bay lives a person for whom Jesus died—a person who faces an eternal destiny of Heaven or Hell—and the Crucified One that we serve still comes to every heart and says,

***Behold, I stand at the door and knock.*** (Revelation 3:20)

I love how one of our Elders, Sally Russ, put it. She said,

We've always been a church of open doors, welcome to anybody who would come to us. But now, we're coming after ya!

And that's what Jesus says.

World, I'm coming after ya! I'm coming after you in love!

Then He sends His disciples—His church—in love. He says,

There's the world. I want you to go after it—in love.

There is one more reason why we're looking at this Open Door plan. When we go through Open Doors, do you know who changes most of all? We do. This is not something that we do in place of seeking spiritual transformation for ourselves. It's very important that we all understand this. Transformation is at the very heart of what we do. It has been a passion of mine for a long time. In order to be transformed, among other things, people need to say "Yes" to a mission from God that is too big to be accomplished by their own power.

The adventure of an Open Door with God will drive us to more prayer, to greater dependence upon God, to deeper learning, to greater joy than living in the comfort zone ever will. I say this, because sometimes churches say,

Let's wait until we are spiritually mature first, and then we can focus on our mission.

How long do you think they wait? They wait forever, because spiritual maturity never comes apart from spiritual mission.

So, our Elders have voted to pursue this multi-site strategy and the renovation of what is going on here: the Open Door. We will be praying and discerning to be sure that God is in it each step of the way—praying to be wise and so on. This year, we will lay the foundation. I'm very excited about this year. Each weekend as we gather together, we're going to study, out of the Book of Acts and other places in the New Testament, the emergence of the church and what it is the Holy Spirit is doing in our lives. It's going to be a really cool year together.

We are looking forward to the Family of God Conference at Mount Hermon in October. All of our leadership is going. Most of our Elders have signed up to go. We're going to look at how the Holy Spirit works in our lives as individuals and in us as a church and in our world. That's going to be a very cool moment in our life as a church. In November, Philip Yancey is going to come and talk to us about Prayer.

In February, Richard Foster is coming back. Last year Richard was one of the leaders here at our conference on Spiritual Transformation. We're devoting a weekend to that. In April, we're going to repeat Compassion Weekend and we're going out into the streets all over the Bay to worship God by serving. By the time we come back here one year from now, we are going to be a

Lean, mean Jesus machine.

There may have been a day when it was possible for somebody around here to say,

This church has so many resources, so many staff, so many gifts, I'm not needed. I can just be a spectator.

That day is over. To realize the Open Door vision, it is going to take every single one of us. Then God will do things that we can't even imagine right now. It's going to take everybody.

Imagine a year from now, 300 people going through the Door and saying,

I'll go some place. I'm going to reach my community for Jesus.

And imagine another 300 people going to another site and saying,

I'll go through this Door. I'll be a Pioneer for Jesus.

Then everybody else who is a part of this congregation going through a door and saying,

I will become an Open Door, fully devoted Christ-following, Acts 2 part of what is going on around here.

That's the vision.

I want to read an old poem that I love. It's about the Door:

*I stay near the door.  
I neither go too far in nor stay too far out.  
The door is the most important door in the world.  
It is the door through which people walk when they find God.  
There's no use my going way inside and staying there  
when so many are still outside  
and they, as much as I, crave to know where the door is.  
And all that so many ever find is only a wall where a door ought to be.  
They creep along the wall like blind men with outstretched groping hands,  
feeling for a door, knowing there must be a door,  
but they never find it.*

*So I stay near the door.*

*The most tremendous thing in the world is for people to find that door—the door to God.*

*The most important thing anyone can do is take hold of one of these blind groping hands and put it on the latch —the latch that only clicks open to the person's own touch.*

*People die outside that door as starving beggars die on cold nights in cruel cities die for want of what is within their grasp. They live on the other side of it, because they have found it. Nothing else matters. Nothing else matters compared to helping them find it and open it and walk in and find You.*

*So I stay by the Door.*

God help us to be an open door church. God open the door real wide. Give us wisdom and discernment to see it and then courage and boldness to walk through it.