

Can These Bones Live? is a book much needed for the so-called “small” church and its leadership! This is a book that is both spiritual (rooted in the scripture and the Holy Spirit) and down to earth (with real-life experiences)! It is a book that calls me to a more faithful ministry!

Dr. Paul D. Schoonmaker
Pastor Emeritus
Calvary Baptist Church
Providence, Rhode Island

Joshua McClure is recognized as a man who hungers and thirsts after God’s own heart. His book *Can These Bones Live?* is timely. I am sure; this book will liberate the body of Christ from the conclusion that the mega church is the emblem of success. I personally endorse and recommend that every preacher, who desires nothing less than to live out the vision of God, should read and add this book to their personal collection as a present and future resource.

Rev. Dr. Kelly Littlejohn, Jr, Pastor
New Beginnings Christian Church
Windsor, Connecticut

Pastor McClure’s understanding of where vision originates is very crucial to any of us being able to do the will of God. The real life experiences that are illustrated seem to jump right off of the pages and become such that the reader can almost feel like he /she is right there in the midst of what is happening

Once the understanding of God’s vision for the church comes, then surely these bones can live.

Rev. Dr. Vincent L. Thompson, Jr., Pastor
Community Baptist Church
Newport, Rhode Island

can these bones live?



THE MIRACULOUS STORY OF WHAT CAN HAPPEN TO A
CHURCH THAT FOLLOWS GOD'S VISION

Joshua A. McClure



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This Book is dedicated to two most wonderful people

Rev. Albert Theodore McClure
Dorothy Josephine McClure

Thank you for introducing me to your God.
Thank you for teaching me how to live.
Thank you for being love.

A grateful son.

and to

Doris, Debbie, and Esther.

The flickering flame of life was snuffed out all too soon.

A loving brother

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And to my church family:

The members of Pleasant Street Baptist Church—my life is so much richer after knowing all of you.

And to my family:

My wife Ida—who has put up with my many life changes and is still around wondering what I am going to do next.

Allison, Leslie, Dorothy and Wesley — three beautiful daughters and a wonderful son, all who have taken my heart hostage.

And to the readers—most of you I'm meeting for the first time. As you read this book you are giving me your most precious commodity, your time. I pray that I prove worthy of your trust.

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FOREWORD

On the following pages a story of faith is told. Like Joshua of the Old Testament, God has given to this “Joshua” a vision and a promise. The Old Testament vision given to Joshua was one of expansion for the people of Israel. The promise to him was that God would be there for him as God had been there for Moses and that no matter what the situation the Lord would not fail or forsake him.

Here we have the opportunity to walk with Pastor McClure as he unfolds the challenges he encountered while attempting to remain faithful to the vision that God gave him. In the end, we hear this pastor’s testimony of how God has kept His promise.

What is revealed here is a congregation modeling the New Testament paradigm of what Jesus mandated the church to be. In this telling we hear the long ago directives of Christ, who implored the disciple community not to be enslaved to tradition, put into contemporary praxis. This pastor challenges the status quo and offers a vibrant alternative to despair.

Here is told the story of how God honors faith. This witness is a source of encouragement for all those who are trying to do ministry, often in the context of hopelessness. It is here that some pastors struggling with despair and overcome by expectations too grand to achieve, may find a fresh witness to the power of faith. The experiences of this pastor and people shared here are existential evidence that the biblical canon is not closed. God continues to reveal God’s self and engage God’s self in the affairs of the human predicament.

This book is one pastor’s contribution to the conversation of how the sovereign Lord works in the lives of people to realize God’s will and bring forth redemptive transformation. It is a conversation worth sharing for it testifies to a reality worth knowing. Moreover, we have here, an epistle of hope for the church today. We taste here sweet water in the desert, a note of triumph for despairing and failing congregations throughout our nation.

I am certain that those who read this witness of faith will find, as I have, new inspiration in the knowledge that God is still working

in the lives of the faithful. God's voice yet speaks new life into dead situations.

W. Franklyn Richardson
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PREFACE

The church is a living organism birthed by the Holy Spirit to manifest God's Kingdom in the world; it is His reign and rule in the hearts of lost people.

The omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent God calls unspiritual people, born in sin, out of the world, to receive a new birth into His Kingdom. Among the called are certain men and women who are destined to lead people from the darkness of sin to experience God's mercy and grace.

Each person ordained to lead must first receive God's vision and direction for the church. Pastors and church leaders without divine vision are like captains of ships without sails. They are merely drifting along, like pilots of boats without rudders. Lacking direction, they are like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for forty years slowly expiring. Without divine direction from God, the church is destined to stagnate and decline, heading undeniably toward a spiritual graveyard.

Churches today are still challenged by God's query to the prophet Ezekiel concerning His people's demise, "*Son of man, can these bones live?*" The prophet's answer was clear and indisputable,

"*O Sovereign Lord, you alone know.*" [Ezekiel 37:3, NIV] The question remains: Can present-day stagnant, expiring church bodies live again? God alone knows!

Joshua A. McClure

INTRODUCTION

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Two compelling forces came together to forge my decision to write this book. One was the result of what I saw happening in the church today. This led me to capitulate to the many people prodding me to record the unveiling of God's vision for Pleasant Street Baptist Church; too many to be deemed coincidental. The other was internal and had to do with my own spiritual journey.

Though the theme of this book did not originate in our times it is irrefutably appropriate to them. It is called forth by a condition which has existed in the Church for many years and is steadily growing worse. I refer to the loss of vitality and fervor, and the fact that the Church has lost direction in meeting the needs of people: lost, hungry, hurting, and powerless people in particular. The contemporary church should be basking in this time of opportunity, since God has given His church authority to declare to the world that there is a sovereign, living God who is a source of grace and truth. The message is that "*the power of God at work*" changes hearts and lives. But, the church has bought into the value system of society and consequently both are feeling the same loss of power and direction. Preoccupation with these secular values of materialism, status and bigness has profaned the church's message.

Contained within the October 2003 issue of the Journal of the Southern Baptist Convention *SBC LIFE* are the churches statistics which span denominational lines. At the time, the journal noted that eighty percent of North American churches were stagnant or in decline. And upwards of 3,500 to 4,000 U.S. churches close each year. Today the

numbers have even grown worse. The message once only hinted at is now bared and much too somber to be ignored.

In light of these alarming and depressing conditions in the church today, the most relevant question before church leaders is, Can these dead and dying churches mired in a spiritual graveyard live again? Can stagnant, decaying, church bodies be revived? As church leaders, the sense of frustration and helplessness leads to a heavy reliance on how-to manuals, well scripted programs, or tools heavy with human effort in an attempt to stimulate spiritual and numerical growth. It is certain that the church cannot be cured by church growth tools because the church is not a “thing”. It is people, and people have distinctive qualities, spiritually formed lives that they bring into any setting. This is what must be transformed—lives. Otherwise, all of our efforts are in vain.

Dr. Ed Stetzer, author of *Finding New Life For Struggling Churches* says, “Dead and dying churches should concern us all ... most of us know the statistics but few of us care enough to engage these churches ... Churches need to change to reach their communities, and denominations need to help them do that ... we must engage dying churches not out of guilt, but because of their potential — to be used of God again in a powerful way ... Many pastors are reading this right now and saying, “That’s us.” What can we do?”

The answer for today is not unlike that which Ezekiel declared to God in reply to His query concerning His exiled people, scattered and dead in Babylon: Can these bones live?

The prophet determined it was in God’s hands if the nation was to live again. His answer was clear and specific “*O Sovereign Lord, you alone know the answer to that.*” God has been the life and hope of the church since its birth at Pentecost, but somehow its flame, fire and vitality have been reduced almost to intellectual ash. And yet God’s answer for the church, His formula for growing vital, alive, churches has remained intact since the early church. The Bible, the only comprehensive instruction manual, attests that church growth is not measured by how many people occupy the pews on a given Sunday morning, nor how large the real estate, neither is it calculated on the quantity of programs and “how-to-grow” materials. Church growth commences with the gospel truth of Jesus Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection leading to the deep conviction of the heart crying out, “*Brothers, what should we do?*” [Acts 2:37b]

Hence, the vision of the church is manifest as “*each day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved.*” [47b] The evidence of growing churches today is characterized by the same attributes as that of this group of early believers. Preaching of the cross results in a deep respect and awe of God; Spirit empowered leadership; needs-oriented ministry; exalting worship; and reverent communal relationships. The message is clear; without a vision of God’s heart for the church, real growth is not possible. Preoccupation with anything other than maintaining healthy spiritual values can only compromise and pervert God’s message to the world. Thus, disappointment ensues in both the church and the world. However, faith confidently declares that God’s vision is the prerequisite to transforming dead or dying churches into vital, living organisms that reclaim broken lives, change hearts, heal hurts, and bring glory to Him.

As I saw what was happening around me, I also became aware of something happening inside me. This surfaced several years ago when I was experiencing one of those periods of spiritual dryness we all encounter. Deep within my spirit I knew I had yet many unanswered questions. In spite of my leadership in the church, in spite of all the good I had done in the ministry, I knew in my heart I had to do something. I wanted to know Jesus in a more personal way. I wanted to have real peace inside. I no longer wanted to do things just because I felt they were right. I desired to know the Lord’s will for me and to have the courage to follow His divine direction.

I soon found myself on my knees, deep in prayer, in awe of God’s absolute holiness. It was a life-changing experience and I gained a completely new understanding of the holy God I believe in and worship. From that moment on, things began to change in my life. Christ had become more real to me. My desire no longer was just to be a good church member, but now I was focused on becoming more like Jesus. The Scriptures I had read many times before now took on greater meaning. When I read the Bible, words would virtually leap off its pages. My hunger for the word of God increased so that I could not get enough, and passion for Jesus was now my joy. In the midst, I discovered a passage of Scripture that to this very day has become the hallmark of my daily life. It is my testimony and my experience:

“I have been crucified with Christ. I myself no longer live, but Christ lives in me. So I live my life in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” [Galatians 2:20]

After that, my relationship with God is hard to describe except to say that I wanted more of God and more from God. I sensed there was more to come, yet not knowing where or how it would come, until that Sunday in December 1976 when God’s heart became visible on the wall of my living room. In retrospect, I believe God had been preparing me since birth for this hallowed image now fixed on the horizon. Much of what had previously happened in my life was about to be wonderfully established into God’s plan.

Dr. Myles Monroe, in his latest book, *The Principles and Power of Vision* asserts, “Vision is the source and hope of life. The greatest gift ever given to mankind is not the gift of sight, but the gift of *vision*. Sight is a function of the eyes; vision is a function of the heart. Eyes that look are common, but eyes that see are rare.”

Vision, then, is not by chance, it is by divine appointment. It is ordained of God; hence vision makes the unseen visible and the unknown possible.

When the vision appeared to me, I was firmly established in business on the threshold of achieving my life’s goals, and making plans to live out the American dream in peace and comfort. Little did I realize that God had chosen me to be the conveyor of His heart to a people in need: people who were isolated, nameless and faceless; homeless people, hopeless people, disenfranchised people; youth in trouble, people in darkness, those suffering from the illness of addiction; those in pain, fearful and alone, lacking strength; those in danger of slipping through the cracks with few caring if they were ever seen again.

In and of itself the vision demanded patient obedience and complete trust in God’s ability to rescue the objects of His compassion and love. Though the vision was given to attract people of all ages, races and ethnicities, socioeconomic and educational levels, it became difficult to understand when it was revealed that the host community was overwhelmingly Caucasian and 90% Catholic. But most surprising of all was that God’s choice of the man sent to bear His vision to a small, sequestered church in Westerly, Rhode Island, was an “African American pastor!” What is certain is that only God knew the portent of the vision, and

He would demand deeper trust and greater intimacy before “*the evidence of things we cannot yet see*” [Hebrews 11:1b] would materialize.

This is a book of faith. It is a vision of ministry. Not vision in general, but vision in particular. The book describes a vision birthed in the heart of God directed towards a people in danger of perishing without it. The writer of Proverbs [29:18, KJV] counsels, “*Where there is no vision the people perish.*” Thus, this book is not about grandiose churches or church buildings. It is not about locating well traveled church growth programs, nor is it about following a step by step How –To manual for growing churches. It is about faithfully following a God-ordained vision and believing God will accomplish the task. It is about Abraham, [Genesis 12:1] who was told, “*Leave your country, your relatives, and your father’s house, and go to the land that I will show you.*” Abraham went as directed. It is about a Saul, [Acts 9:6] who encountered the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus and was told, “*Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you are to do.*” Saul [who later became Paul] went as commanded. It is about Joshua, [Joshua 5:14b] who fell on his face before the angel of the Lord in reverence, and cried out, “*I am at your command ... What do you want your servant to do?*” It is about this Joshua, who was asked the personal, probing, penetrating, question of Jesus [John 21:15-17] “*Do you love me?*” When the reply came in the affirmative, humanity surrendered to Divinity and this man’s heart was taken captive by God’s directive to, “*Feed My sheep.*” And Joshua has done as directed.

Thus, the substance of this message is that God’s vision, lodged in the heart of just one faithful servant, can set aflame a ministry so far reaching and so dynamic that it can heal hurting people, resurrect dead and dying congregations, restore hope, reclaim smaller churches, and turn communities to Him. When vision is manifested people from far and near will appear at the door and buildings to support this new ministry will arise. Vans to transport people to and fro will arrive. Gifts to enable ministries will be granted. Children will flock to the church. Pastors and churches will once again see vision, and no longer will people lament “We can’t.” Now there will emanate a resounding echo: God will, as vision manifests before their very eyes

This book is about the miracles wrought by vision. It is about seeing through eyes of faith. It is akin to the Prophet Elisha’s prayer