

Title: Vision Sunday 2012
Text: Hebrews 11:1-12:2
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The Victoria Falls on the Zambezi River are the largest in the world; more than a 100 meters high and almost two kilometers wide. The volume of water that spills over the falls causes a mist that fills the air like a fog. The locals call this mist the 'smoke that thunders' and it can sometimes be seen up to fifty miles away. At the base of the falls the water from the falls rushes down the gorge in torrents, creating the world's largest rapids. The brave or the foolhardy, it depends on your perspective, can pay good money to shoot the rapids in an eight person rubber raft.

The rapids below the Victoria Falls are some of the most violent and dangerous in the world. Huge volumes of water, large waves, big drops and massive boulders make for eye-popping, adrenaline charged wet roller coaster ride. Some of the names of the rapids give you some idea of the ride you get; Stairway to Heaven, Devil's Toilet Bowl, Gnashing Jaws of Death, The Washing Machine, The Terminator, Oblivion.

If you chose to raft the rapids of the Zambezi, your guide will give you some instructions to prepare you. He or she will say something like this: "When the raft flips ..." There will be no "If the raft flips" or "Or on the off chance we get flipped" but, "When the raft flips." The guide will go on, "When the raft flips... stay in the rough water. You will be tempted to swim toward the stagnant water at the edge of the banks. Don't do it. "

Stay in the rough water? That seems absurd. Why stay where the water is the roughest? Why not swim to the still water on the side of the banks? That seems sensible, doesn't it? There is a very good reason to stay in the rough water and avoid the still and stagnant water on the banks of the Zambezi. In fact, there are lots of good reasons. They look like this. It is in the still water that the crocodiles lurk. It is in the stagnant water that the danger waits.

Two thousand years ago on the Day of Pentecost, energy far more powerful even than the thousands of liters of water that hurtle over the Victoria Falls every second fell on Jesus' followers. It was power that sounded like a rushing wind and looked like tongues of fire. This power, the power of the Holy Spirit, carried the disciples like a river carries a raft out into the streets of Jerusalem, then Judea, then Samaria and eventually to the ends of the world. The power of the Holy Spirit is a rushing wind, tongues of fire and a mighty, surging river. Caught up in the power of the Holy Spirit, the disciples were carried on a white-knuckle, adrenaline charged journey. It was also dangerous. They were opposed and persecuted. Some even paid for their journey with their lives. All the while they were tempted to swim out of the rapids towards the safety of still water.

On the Zambezi, stagnant water is dangerous water. In the Christian life, stagnancy is equally dangerous. Life is where there is movement – the movement of God's Holy Spirit. Life, the adventurous faith-filled life that Jesus calls us to, is where the rough and tumble water is. The movement of God's Spirit is an unstoppable force far stronger than the rapids of the Zambezi River. The church is at its best, the church is most alive when it resists the temptation to swim for the safety of the river bank and instead decides to risk being caught up in the rough and tumble of what God is doing in the world.

One small Christian community that was tempted to swim for the safety of the shore was the church the writer of Hebrews addressed. We don't know much about this church, except that it was most likely small – no more than 30-40 people – and was being persecuted because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Riding the river of faith felt way too dangerous. They were tempted to pull back from telling others about Jesus, from loving their non-Christian neighbors, from risking everything for the sake of the gospel – to seek safety. Who could blame them? But the safest place is not on the shore, but in the middle of the river where God's Spirit flows.

The writer tells them that the journey they are on will have all sorts of twists and turns, opportunities and challenges – but that they have a destination that God's Holy Spirit is carrying them to. He says:

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.
(Hebrews 11:1)

I grew up learning this key verse in the scriptures this way: 'Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen.'

Then the writer reminds them of the people who rode the river of faith before them. It is brilliant. Eighteen times he says 'by faith' as he lists another man or woman who resisted the temptation to swim for the safety of the shore, but instead chose to stay in the middle of the river and allow God to carry them along.

By faith, Noah built an ark while the sun was shining and his neighbours were laughing. Noah chose the middle of the river, not the safety of the shore.

By faith, Moses led the whining, grumbling people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt to the verge of the Promised Land. Moses chose the middle of the river, not the safety of the shore.

By faith, Joshua sounded the trumpets and saw the walls of Jericho fall. Joshua chose the middle of the river, not the safety of the shore.

By faith, David picked up five smooth stones and fell Goliath. David chose the middle of the river, not the safety of the shore.

By faith, by faith, by faith – again and again the writer of Hebrews testifies to the men and women of faith who risked riding the rapids, because that was where God was, rather than swim for the safety of the shore. In fact, the writer tells the Hebrew believers, don't swim for the shore – trust God out in the middle of the river. He says:

Without faith it is impossible to please God.
(Hebrews 11:6)

This faith is simply belief in action. It is acting on the belief that we can trust God with our life, and that is Holy Spirit will carry us on the only journey worth traveling.

As a church we have said that one of the eight defining values for our community is Adventurous Faith. The definition we have given Adventurous Faith is on the Move handout you received as you came in this morning. Let's read together how we define Adventurous Faith:

Acting out of the conviction that faith is an unfolding adventure that God call us into, we will allow risk and utter dependency upon God to mark our journey.

Adventurous Faith is deciding to get into the raft and go where the Holy Spirit flows. Adventurous Faith is choosing the exhilaration of the middle of the river, rather than the safety of the shore.

Over the past few years we have seen a lot of change in our church as increasingly we have embraced Adventurous Faith. Let me name three changes that I am particularly thankful for:

As we have embraced Adventurous Faith, we have become larger and younger. I am ordained as a Uniting Church minister. I am incredibly proud of the heritage of faith that I have been nurtured in. But I am deeply troubled that most Uniting Church congregations are becoming smaller and older. As a denomination, we are in decline. Last year the Christian Research Association released data that showed over the last ten years Uniting Church attendance has declined 30%. I would call that a free-fall. This is tragic.

By comparison, over the last five years our average Sunday attendance has grown by almost 50%, from just under 600 people to just short of 900 on any given Sunday, here at Robina and at Pac Pines. God has been good!

Across Australia, the average age of a Uniting Church attendee is 60 years of age. I am not sure what our average is – but I delight in the fact that we have every generation represented at Newlife – from newborn babies to our two beautiful 97 year olds – Myra and Muriel. We are one big, happy, diverse and sometimes dysfunctional family. I don't know our average age, but I do know we are younger than we were a few years ago.

Five years ago we averaged 80 children and teenagers in Sunday morning worship. Today that figure has doubled to 160. More than that, five years ago we did not have a viable young adult community in our church. Just a few years ago our University aged young people could meet in my lounge room. Now on Sunday night 140 mainly young adults meet to celebrate faith. Praise God! All in all, 300 of the 900 people who attend worship here at Newlife every Sunday are under the age of 25. Over the last few years, literally hundreds of children, youth and young adults have embraced faith in Christ. Last Sunday morning at the 8.30 service we baptized one of them. We are not your typical Uniting Church...

To those of you who are over the age of 60, I want to say a sincere thank you. Thank you for embracing adventurous faith. Thank you for gritting your teeth, swallowing your complaints and embracing change as we seek to reach a new generation. Thank you for being patient and tolerant. Thank you for faithfully praying for and serving our children and young people. Thank you for placing a higher value on seeking to save the lost than your own comfort. The growing number of children, young people and young adults in our church are your legacy.

As we have embraced adventurous faith we have become more generous. I do not need to tell you that our current economic climate is tough. Many of us are struggling in business, or barely hanging on to our jobs or struggling to make ends meet with our retirement savings. But, as we have risked getting into the raft with Jesus we have become more generous, even when we have every reason not to. This week Ken and Barry passed on some figures I want to share with you.

Last year you gave in normal tithes and offerings \$691,000, which is 11% higher than in 2010.

But in addition to this you also gave \$18,400 to directly support the work of Newlife Care.

You also gave an amazing additional \$46,500 to support our Acts 1:8 Mission projects and partners overseas.

On top of this, you gave \$94,952 to our Vision 1000 appeal which has underwritten our new Pac Pines campus.

But it didn't end there. In the middle of an economic crisis, God challenged us to give to Time to Build as we seek to expand our facilities to make room for those to come. You pledged \$3.7 to give \$3.7 million over three years. In just six months last year, you gave \$523,247 of that pledged amount. You have given around \$100,000 more already this year. Wow!

In embracing adventurous faith we have become more generous, recognising that everything we have is a gift from God to be stewarded and used for His purposes. During 2011 you gave a total of almost \$1.4 million to the work of God through this church.

Thank you, thank you - thank you!

There are so many things that God is doing in our midst as we embrace adventurous faith that we could celebrate this morning. Every week lives are being changed and transformed by the gospel. Every week God is drawing new people to become part of our family. Every week we are seeing God doing something new and wonderful.

But we are not called to live in the past, but to embrace the future God has planned for us. Adventurous Faith is getting in the raft with Jesus and riding the movement and wave of God's Spirit.

Let's go back to Hebrews. The writer spends 40 verses in Hebrews 11 recounting the exploits of the great heroes of faith – the men and women who did amazing things with and for God. It is rousing piece of rhetoric – a wonderful speech. It

makes you want to offer a standing ovation to these amazing men and women. Bravo! Well done! Whoo, whoo!

But the writer is not seeking our applause, but our action modelled on their example. In Hebrews 12:1 he says this:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us clap and cheer and applaud.

Actually, he doesn't say that. This is really what he says:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

(Hebrews 12:1-2)

The writer is saying, 'Get out of the stands and onto the track!'

He is saying, 'Lace up your running shoes and race to win!'

The writer is saying, 'Get off dry land and into the raft and out into the white water!'

He is saying, 'Put on your lifejacket, prepare to get wet and hang on for dear life – because this is going to get exciting!'

He is saying, 'Don't just sit there - move!'

He is saying, take Jesus as your example – he is the pioneer of faith, the trailblazer of faith, the river guide of faith. Jesus lived always with forward motion – never looking back, but always looking forward – even to the point of willingly embracing the cross. The writer is saying, you do the same church! That is adventurous faith.

The theme we have chosen for Vision Sunday is move. We believe that to live as people of adventurous faith, God is calling us always onwards – never standing still, but moving as and where God calls us. There are three particular directions and ways we believe God is calling us to move over the coming year. We believe that God is calling us to move deeper into his word, to move further in mission and move stronger in our commitment.

Move...deeper into God's Word

Hopefully you have picked up already this year that we are emphasizing the importance of every believer reading God's Word. We started with 21 Days with John, and now 21 Days with Judges and next week we start Creed. Last week I finished writing forty daily devotionals we will start reading next Sunday. The book is at the printer as we speak and will be available next week, as well as an E-book for I pads and Kindles. We are inviting the whole church to read the same bible reading and reflection every day for the forty days leading up to Easter. What a powerful time this is going to be.

Why are we doing this? Every piece of research says that the most important determining factor in spiritual growth is the amount of time a Christian reads and reflects on the bible. This is a dangerous book. The more you read it, the more you change and grow.

I have said it before and I will say it again; as much as I would like to, I can't read your bible for you. You might have all sorts of good excuses as to why you don't, but as Benjamin Franklin said:

I never knew a man who was good at making excuses who was good at anything else.
(Benjamin Franklin)

The time for excuses is over. If you are not reading your bible regularly, start with Creed – but then keep on going.

As well as daily devotions, we want to offer you other opportunities to dive deeper into God's Word. Small groups and courses like Bethel are really important for this. In addition, we will be offering various short courses at Winter School again this year. Here is where it gets really exciting.

You will notice that on page 3 of the Move document you received we have identified three key long-term goals for our church. One, to plant five new churches by 2021. We are well underway. Two, to fully develop our wonderful property. That is what Time to Build is all about. And three, to develop a ministry and leadership training centre.

On this last one, I can announce today that we are entering into partnership with a South Australian Bible College, Uniting College of Leadership and Theology. Through this partnership we will offer certificate, diploma, degree and masters level subjects in ministry, leadership, bible and theology – taught here at Newlife and also available through distance education. In July we will offer our first degree level intensive on Christian Leadership, taught by Pastor Craig Bailey. You will hear more about this in coming weeks.

Move...further in Mission

Jesus calls us to go – to move – and make disciples. We believe God is calling us to take more risks, be more innovative we move further in mission. In Acts 1:8, Jesus said to his disciples and to us:

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

(Acts 1:8)

We have an Acts 1:8 mandate. The river of the Holy Spirit compels and carries us to our streets, our city, our nation and the nations of the world with the gospel.

This year we will be going to the world, and the world will be coming to us.

Already this year we have had sent a mission team to Thailand. We have more planned. In December, Viv will be leading a team to the Solomon Islands. In September-October we our 12two community will be sending a team to Cambodia. And in July we are hoping and praying to send a work party to Bosnia. God has a heart for the nations and so should we.

In 2012 we are going to the world, but also the world is coming to us. I am really excited to announce this morning three very special guests who will be visiting us to share about what God is doing around our world.

Dan Baumann works with Jon and Elin Morris at the Youth With a Mission base in Kona, Hawaii. For nine years Dan worked as an administrator in an eye hospital in Afghanistan. In 1997 he and a friend traveled for two weeks to Iran to share with others about the love of Jesus. As they were leaving the country, Dan and his friend were arrested on trumped up charges and imprisoned for nine weeks. Dan has written a book about this experience, and another book about being a follower of Jesus called 'A Beautiful Way'. Dan travels the world speaking at churches and conferences and he will be our guest at 12two on Sunday March 25.

Jossy Chacko is an Indian-Australian who lives in Melbourne. He is the founder of Empart, a global ministry that exists to ignite church planting movements among unreached people. Empart's goal is to plant 100,000 churches among unreached people in Asia by 2030.

Jossy left India at the age of 17, with \$20 in his pocket, a one way ticket to Australia and a big dream to become a business success –which he achieved. In 1997, Jossy's life was changed forever by an encounter on his honeymoon with an eight year old homeless boy from the slums of Delhi, which lead to the establishment of Empart.

Empart is a prolific church planting movement. It averages 3 new church plants every day, reaching about 6.5 million people every week through its various activities. It has more than 2,000 full-time workers – local leaders - and offices in 7 countries. Jossy will be speaking at all Sunday services here at Robina on Sunday July 29.

Baroness Caroline Cox was given a life peerage in 1982 by the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. From 1986 to 2005 she was the Deputy Speaker of the House of Lords in the United Kingdom. She is the Vice President of the Royal College of Nursing. She has received numerous awards from the United Nations and other institutions for her international humanitarian work. She received the Wilberforce Award having redeemed or bought the freedom of more than 2000 slaves in Sudan. Baroness Cox is the founder and chief executive of Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust, a Christian organization dedicated to providing aid to otherwise forgotten persecuted and oppressed people around the world. She has also awarded Honorary Doctorates by universities in the UK, the US, the Russian Federation and Armenia. Baroness Cox's humanitarian work has taken her on several missions to conflict zones, including Armenia, the Sudan, Nigeria, the Burmese jungles and Indonesia. She will travel to speak with us straight after being a part of a parliamentary delegation to that is visiting North Korea. She is remarkable leader and we are blessed that she will be with us for a whole weekend through September, speaking at a women's event on Saturday, and at all three services here at Robina on Sunday.

I don't know about you – but I can't wait!

This is all so very exciting. But before we go to the world with the gospel, God calls us to go to our city, our Jerusalem – the Gold Coast.

This year we are making more room for people to come and hear the gospel. This year we will literally be moving from this church sanctuary across the courtyard to worship in the hall as we expand these facilities. Our new expanded facilities are not about building a monument, but about making room for a movement – the movement of God's Spirit. Our new facilities are not for us and our comfort, but for those who are to come.

Here is where we are up to with Time to Build. We are in the last throws of getting council approval and we are about to go to tender. Those tenders should be back to us by the end of March, we will select our preferred builder, after which we will seek approval from the Finance and Property Board of the Uniting Church to start work. This last step is the biggest and most important. Without that final approval we cannot start to build. The biggest issue affecting that approval will be the Finance and Property Board's assessment of our ability to meet the costs of the building. They will be looking at how much money we have in the bank. To the three hundred or so individuals and families who are giving to Time to Build; thank you! And if you are able to give any part of your pledge amount over the next couple of months – that would be awesome. I am going to be really frank with you. To get that final approval is going to require an 'only God' result. But all the way through Time to Build we have been blessed with 'only God' results. And I believe that in a couple of months we are going to receive another one. Amen?!

God is calling us to move deeper into his word, further in our mission and finally, God is calling is to:

Move ...stronger in our commitment

Before you get in the raft to shoot the Zambezi rapids you need to assess the risks and rewards. Once you put on a life-jacket, pick up an oar and get on the water, then there is no turning back. You will never enjoy the thrill of the adventure from the shore of the river.

God is calling us to move; to move out into the middle of the river and ride the wave, the movement of God's Holy Spirit. Before we can do that, each and every one of us has to make a decision; will we get into the raft or not? I believe that God is calling some of us to move and become stronger in our commitment to Christ and his church.

It is time for some of us to Move from being passengers to become participants.

It is time for some of us to Move from being consumers to become contributors.

It is time for some of us to Move from being spectators to become competitors.

To help you do this, I want to leave you three challenges for three different groups of people.

First, some of you are pretty new to Newlife. You been here a few weeks or a few months, some of you longer, and you are checking us out. That's awesome. We love having you here. Some of you in this group enjoy the fact you can be a little anonymous in this church. Some of you even do what I call 'the courtyard dash', sprinting from church during the last song so that you don't get caught chatting. If you are in this group I want to challenge you to move out from behind your anonymity and let us get to know you. Next week we have a Newcomers function, which many of you have received an invitation to. If you have, or you haven't – come! There are no such things as anonymous, lone-ranger Christians. Faith is lived out in community. You need us and we, the church, need you.

Second, some of you have been here a while, but you have never made the step to become a recognized member of Newlife. On the back of the Move handout you will see the covenant commitments we members to make as each of us respond to God's grace to us. In a few weeks time we are holding our first membership class for the year. If Newlife is your spiritual home and you haven't become a member then I invite you to sign up this class.

Third, others of you are already members. You have made the covenant commitments on this brochure. Wonderful! In a fortnight's time, on communion Sunday, we are going to ask you to renew that covenant. And so I invite you to prayerfully reflect on what each of these statements mean so that when the time comes, your 'yes' can be 'yes', and your 'no', 'no'.

God has given us the green light. He wants us to Move. It's time to Move. It's time to trust our lives to Christ = the pioneer, the trailblazer, the river guide of our faith - fully and completely.

Annie Dillard tells the story of a British adventurer, James Taylor, who in the 1930's made contact with a remote village in the Papuan highlands. He had arranged for a rough bush air strip to be cleared so that he could land his bi-plane there. The villagers were dumbstruck by the plane. They had never seen one before. One day as Taylor was preparing to fly back to Port Moresby, he came out to the airstrip to get into his plane. There he discovered a villager who had cut some tree vines and used them to lash himself to the undercarriage of the fuselage of the plane. When Taylor asked him what he was doing, the villager said, no matter what happened to him, he had to see where the plane came from.

Folks - that is adventurous faith; strapping yourself to a plane with jungle vines. We are called to do something similar. We are called to lash, to tether, to tie ourselves to Christ and to go wherever he goes. We are to take his yoke upon us. We will not stand on the shore and watch the adventure pass us by. We will get out into the rapids where real life is – with Jesus as our river-guide.

In two weeks time I will be inviting all of you, every one of you, to pray this prayer of commitment to God with me; that we all might move together:

God, I am no longer my own by yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed for you or laid aside for you, exalted for you or brought low for you. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.

And now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. So be it. And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.