

# STANDOUTS

by **DION GARRETT** *Senior Pastor*

**“You’re getting a little big for your britches” wasn’t quite a family motto, but I sure heard it a lot. Growing up, I was steeped in the working class values of modesty, humility, and hard work. In my church life, I was reared in the Protestant values of the German Lutheran Reformation that profoundly shaped my perspective on faith and life. The message was clear, “Work hard, treat others well, and don’t ever act like you’re better than anyone else.”**

I’m grateful for the way I was raised. It helped me grow into a respectful and hardworking adult. But lately I spent a lot of time wondering, “Is *standing out* really a bad thing?”

What I once believed was clearly biblical, *Christian*, I now see as having more to do with the ethics of the industrialized society I grew up in. My grandparents were largely factory workers, the members of my church were the same with a few farmers and the odd professional sprinkled in here and there. In the experiment of industrialization, society became a great machine and people became the parts. Raising up people who were as interchangeable as possible was the way to keep the great machine going *and growing*. The kind of humility, modesty, and hard work I had been raised with had more to do with economic policy during an era of tremendous industrial growth, than the teachings of Jesus in Scripture.

The Jesus of Scripture is a fierce advocate of “standing out.” Always humble, although in a different way than many of us were taught, Jesus is the one who urges us to be a “city on a hill” and the “light of the world.” He says, “Let your light shine before others, that they might see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). The more I read the Scriptures, the more I am understanding that making yourself seen, known, and heard isn’t what some would call, “getting big for your britches”, instead it’s a calling; **Jesus tells us to *stand out***.

And then there’s Paul. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul goes through a long section describing the humility of Jesus, telling us to *imitate* Christ’s humility. And then in the next breath he says,

*“<sup>14</sup> Do everything without grumbling or arguing,*

(sounds like how I was raised!)

*“<sup>15</sup> so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.”*

(yup, that’s right, be faultless, good, and pure)

*Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky<sup>16</sup> as you hold firmly to the word of life.*

(Wait a minute, what? “Shine like stars?” Isn’t that boastful? Arrogant? The opposite of humble?)

*And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain.”*

(Boast? What happened to all the humility talk?)

Realizing that while God calls me to be humble, “shining like stars,” “letting my light shine,” and being a “city on a hill” is also part of my calling is something that I’ve been grappling with lately. Personally, and with St. John in mind.

Our 2016 community research revealed that St. John doesn't stand out much in the minds of unchurched and dechurched people<sup>1</sup> in west county. Little was known about us. It was sometimes even difficult to clarify *which church* we were talking about. There are several churches with similar-sounding names in our community, some with the *exact same* name. One of our respondents said it all when she said, "Not having been raised Catholic, every saint is the same to me." For the record, I was not permitted to barge into the focus group room to explain, "No, we are not Catholic." But we discovered when people hear "saint" names, that's a common perception. And even for those who know better, there are a LOT of "saint names" to sort through here in *Saint Louis*.

Later on, when prompted with photos, descriptions, and other details some people in the focus groups were able to identify us, but what they knew about us was either outdated or superficial. They talked about the fact that our campus was big, or that we caused traffic problems on Manchester Road. They talked of multiple service formats that no longer exist. Someone even mentioned the bright red carpet! Meanwhile, there were other churches in west county they knew much more about. It's not as if unchurched and dechurched people know *nothing* about churches in our community, it's just that they don't know much about *us!*

I've been increasingly bothered by these revelations over the last two years. I know we're an amazing church, an *atypical* church! In *Getting Started*, we get to hear from people who are so grateful to have found us. Yet, nearly every month we also hear people lament how long it took to find us because they didn't understand what we were about. While I'm deeply *humbled* by God's favor and blessing on us, I don't want to blend in to the landscape any longer, I want to *stand out!* I want to be known for who we really are, not through fuzzy, outdated, or inaccurate perceptions. What we also discovered in our focus groups, is that we have something going here that we should feel proud about, something that is truly life-changing!

When our focus group facilitator began to share more with the participants in each group about who we really are, most people were surprised and intrigued by what they heard. Although their perceptions of us were horribly inaccurate, if they perceived of us at all, they began to lean in with curiosity and interest as we provided more insight into who we are. They began to discover that there is a church, right in the heart of west St. Louis County

(with a robust online presence for you out-of-towners), who is *very different* than other churches, a *standout*, if you will. One person said, "I think of churches like *The Crossing* or *The Journey* as being more progressive and accepting, so realizing there are others out there like this came as a surprise."

Another said, "I would be more interested in attending St. John after reading this, because it makes it sound not as formal... I always thought Lutheran churches were really formal."

It should be no secret that these revelations have been haunting me, I've written and spoken about them several times. Last year I introduced you to our St. John Brand Advisory Team, who has helped me process all this and has been working hard to plot a path forward. I also just completed a round of well-attended, "Brand Town Hall" meetings where I shared our research and what we've been doing about it in greater detail. These days I'm feeling very affirmed in *who we are* but I'm increasingly concerned that few people know us *as we are*. I'm not okay with being anonymous; I hope you aren't either! But we can change that!

Right now, as you're reading this, we're in a weekend message series that addresses how we can better *stand out*. Through our research, prayer, scripture study, and some good ol' self-examination, we have discovered key messages I believe our community needs to understand about us. If they can see us as we really are, then we can better fulfill our mission. If you've missed the first part of the series, *Standouts*, I urge you to go to our archives at [stjstl.net/watch](http://stjstl.net/watch) and check out the messages you've missed. It is vitally important that we all give our attention to this issue.

We are a church like no other, but why should that remain a secret? It's time we emerge from the fuzzy background and boldly *standout!*

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<sup>1</sup> In our research, unchurched people were defined as those who have never had a meaningful, consistent relationship with a church. Dechurched people were defined as those who have not been attending church for a least three years.