

Good afternoon.

I cannot begin to tell you how excited I am to be here. I feel affirmed in so many ways, because I am an artist first and foremost—I believe that—and the arts are such a big part of our church that to have an invitation from TCG has just really made my year, my month, whatever you want to call it. I'm excited, and I'm grateful for this invitation, and I bring you greetings all the way from Harlem, USA, and so I'm thankful again to just be here. I'm gonna share some things that I think will be helpful and in some way talk about engagement of audience, or our world, our congregation, and I want to first talk about this church and how I came to what we call FCBC [First Corinthian Baptist Church]. I came to FCBC ten years ago, and, before that, I was serving at a church in Durham, North Carolina. I have to confess that being a Pastor was not on my agenda when I was in grad school. Although I went to divinity school at Duke University, I did not feel that I had tolerance, or the patience, to be Pastor and deal with people in the kind of way I saw pastors dealing, and I tell people I got backdoored—cornered into pastoring in a strange way. I graduated from Duke; Duke had hired me to be a university minister. They were only paying three quarter time. Three quarter time wasn't that good, but they gave you full benefits. So at the time I had two children and a wife and full benefits sounded real good. So I took the job, but we had a family of four, so what I was making wasn't cutting it. And I love preaching, I love preaching, I even—I do not want to pastor, I love preaching. I love communicating. And so there was a small church in the east end of Durham that wanted me to come preach. I went there a few times and after preaching there a few times I remember a conversation with my wife. I said, "Look, I'm gonna have to get another job because this is not cutting it." And she said to me, she said, "Why don't you go to the church and ask to be pastor?" And I said, "You don't pastor for money." And my wife said, you know, "Well who told you that?" And I said, "Well you know what, let me do this for a couple of years and then I'll stop, go back, finish PHD work, and we'll be good." Six months into pastoring this small church in Durham, North Carolina, I realized that this was my calling. And it is strange how you find yourself doing things that you did not anticipate. Small congregation. I remember they were paying me—we got paid every week—with a check for \$257.50. Every week, fourteen thousand dollars a year, it was fourteen thousand dollars that I was making, and it was a blessing to me and my family. And we watched that church grow from about twenty five members or so to five hundred, and we were doing well. I mean extremely well. My wife was an educator, she ended up being the youngest principal in Durham. I was still at Duke, still pastoring the church, then I get a call from this church that I used to preach for occasionally in New York. New York was home for me, and they asked me, was I interested in applying for the position of pastor? My first reaction was no. For one, I knew the church, and... It would be a tremendous headache. It was in an old dilapidated theater that was falling apart, literally, and—but somewhere in the process I felt—I remember one night I prayed and I just felt that I had to be here. And I did something that I did not tell any of my friends: I decided to go to the First Corinthian in New York. I didn't tell my friends, I didn't tell my family, because they would have told me not to go. When I went to First Corinthian I took a sixty thousand dollar cut to go to this church. I didn't tell anybody because if I'da told somebody who loved me they'd've said I was crazy. So I did it, I took that cut, my wife left her job as a principal, and we came to First Corinthian Baptist Church. There were about a hundred people on Sunday morning in a sanctuary that seated eighteen hundred people. So you can imagine what that looked like. I told somebody I could've taken a chair and thrown it into the congregation. It wouldn't've hit anybody.

It was—it was scattered, right? And I remember in the interview when they asked me, they asked me two questions: one, what is your vision for the church? And I have to tell you, I did not want to be there, so I was gonna be a little obstinate, obtuse, a little bit, and I told them, “I have no vision. I’m not pastor yet, and if I become pastor I’m sure I’ll get a vision, but until then, I said, until then it won’t happen.” And then all of a sudden something just rose up in me and I told, at the time, the Chairman of the Trustee Ministry, I said, “Here’s what I will tell you, though. If you call me to be the pastor,” I said, “within a short time there are gonna be people waiting on line outside this building to get into this church.” And everyone in the meeting laughed, because this church was on its last leg. And I came to the church—I remember my first class teaching. We were teaching—in the middle of the class, the chandelier exploded and a fire broke out. Every week something else was breaking, plumbing going haywire, electricity going haywire, and so, trying to put this vision out for this church—it was a theater. It was a theater that was built in 1913 by Marvin, I think, Harmon, was his name, and when he built it, it was one of the first palatial movie houses in New York City. And they built this in 1913, opened up in February 1913, Henry Marvin, actually, was the name of the owner who decided it, and Thomas Lamb was the architect who built or designed it. It was his first time really building this kind of palatial theater. And so they ran it from 1913 as a picture house, it was called at the time, and they were not doing very well. So they partnered with a gentleman by the name of DS Moss and then they started having vaudeville events in this theater. That didn’t last for so long, and they struggled for years. Almost fifty years to keep this thing alive. A funny joke—one of my deacons said that when she was a child she came to that theater, the church, to hear the Temptations, and so they struggled. In 1963 they closed the theater. Fifty years after they opened. In 1964 First Corinthian Baptist Church bought the theater. And when they bought the theater, many of the congregants put their own money as collateral because it was only about a hundred and fifty people at the time, and bought a theater that seats eighteen hundred. And everybody thought they were crazy, that pastor was crazy, and he said something to them, he said, “I’m not buying this theater for us.” He said, “I’m buying it for the person who’s gonna make the best use of it in the future.” That was his vision. He knew that he could not do it, but he had to build it. And he believed that in the future someone would come, some pastor would come, and really make this place what it could be. And so I’m thankful that he bought the theater, because it is—we renovated it in 2011, we started in 2012, and so this broken down building, I mean literally we had threats from the city to condemn the balcony. It was that bad. We started the renovation project in 2011, we finished it in 2012, here, is the... is the theater... [showing slides] We called the theater—and I’ll get to that—we called The Sanctuary FCBC and I’ll explain that... another view... the lobby... the rooms... so you’ll see—I’ll go back—that’s it. So as you can look and we kinda, when we did this renovation we updated everything. We made it more tech-friendly. I mean, you call it we did it. We invested in this building. And the one thing we wanted to do—and I wanted to do—was to bring back that theater. So what we did is once we finished renovation in 2012, in 2013 we launched what we call The Sanctuary at FCBC, which would be Harlem’s newest arts and cultural space. So we began to market it as a space for art, not just a church, but a space for art as well, with its own artistic director and everything. And so we birthed The Sanctuary at FCBC in 2013 and it was created to make the arts accessible to those who otherwise might not be able to afford Broadway productions. And so we wanted to bring Broadway uptown in a way that was affordable, and one of the caveats—because we’re not looking to make money necessarily. It’s not our lifeblood for the

church—but we make sure that, any event that is there, we charge no more than twenty dollars for any event. Which as long as we're able to cover the overhead and the people who run it are able to do the bare minimum, we don't want to be a burden to the people who come. The focus is to create, to imagine, and to transform, but I want you to get that, that we have had there partnerships with the Jazz at Lincoln Center, Jazzmobile of New York City, Broadway's Original Voices, Dance Theater of Harlem—Dance Theater of Harlem does *The Nutcracker* there every year at The Sanctuary, at the church, and that cost for the people of the community is ten dollars to see that. Alvin Ailey Dance Company has done things there—so we've been, we've become a strong force in the arts community in Harlem. That was the dream, that was the vision that I felt. I wanted to make this what it used to be in its glory day. And so when we launched The Sanctuary at FCBC, it was in 2013, one hundred years after it opened in 1913. And so we wanted to reimagine this space as an artistic space. But something else we did at the same time—people thought we were crazy while we were doing the renovations at the church to get it to this point—we built another facility, so we had two projects going on at the same time. Another project was three blocks north of the church. We called it The Dream Center. Because what was happening was, I started to do more activism in the community, especially around education. We saw in our community and a lot of schools in the neighboring community, they were losing arts programs, losing drama, losing music. Things that were essential for me when I came up as a young man in school. They were being taken out, they were being cuts made in the schools in our community, and so the children had no outlet, no artistic outlet, no cultural venue that they can engage in. It wasn't happening in school, so we built The Dream Center in 2013 as well with the focus, as Sade said, on arts enrichment, leadership development, and economic empowerment, but with a heavy focus in the arts. Young lady who directs The Dream Center is a dancer, former dancer, but that was the focus. So I wanna give you quick glimpses, a two-minute video of The Dream Center, and then we'll get into what I really want to share today.

[video]

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So The Dream Center is this small-time fast space that is designed to empower and ignite the dreams of the community, in particular because of the purpose of who we are as a congregation. You walk into the building at FCBC, you see in the lobby on the wall that says, "We are an ever-evolving community of visionaries and dreamers who've been called by God to live the lives we're created to live, commanded by God to love beyond the limits of our prejudices, and commissioned by God to serve." Called to live, commanded to love, commissioned to serve, that my belief is that all of us in some way shape or form are visionaries, we are dreamers, we have the capacity to do things that we never imagined we could do and part of that is because of our inherent view that we are all artists in some way. Part of the problem is that no one, for some of the young people in our community, has really pushed them to be their better selves, has really pushed them to ignite the energy and the passion that exists within them. And so we do creative partnerships with the church and with The Dream Center, with Classical Theater of Harlem, with Alvin Ailey, with Jazz at Lincoln Center, and all the programs you heard on the video are free. At The Dream Center there are forty-three programs that we run very year, and every single program is free. And it's multigenerational.

The youngest person involved in our program at The Dream Center is four years old, and the oldest person who's been involved with our programs is seventy six years old. And so we keep that range, just moving and floating and fluctuating, but people are excited about it because—because I believe from the bottom of my heart that what changed my life was somebody believing in me, somebody believing in what I could do and pushing me to be my better self. Our senior program is actually entitled “When I Grow Up” and the belief is that no matter how old you are, you're a dreamer. You're a visionary. You can still dream. You do not have to give up on those dreams and a future life just because someone said you're too old to do it or don't have enough resources. So we do this; we fuel the programs they go through, enliven and quicken the spirits and the hearts of the people who are invested in that community again. Why? Because I believe everyone, everyone, is a visionary, and a dreamer. The problem is, what I believe, is that many of us have become domesticated with our dreams. And with our visions. Along the way someone domesticated you, and you got civilized and educated and smart and started wanting to fit in and find a niche so that you could be successful and make money and raise your family and all those things that really reinforce the trappings of success. What many people go after. But along the journey, they lose their dreams. They lose their passion. They lose the capacity to believe in what is possible in their lives. And so that is what we do in the congregation. I started by saying I believe I'm an artist. Even as Sade said, I took out the traditional church pulpit, moved it away, and so every Sunday you see when I get ready to preach I have a table, a little chair. I sit down, I talk, I walk around, my coffee mug, whatever you call it, and I do it—because I want people to feel engaged. I want them to feel like they're part of something bigger than themselves. Again, because we're an ever-evolving community of visionaries and dreamers and that's the space we've created. And the space has fueled that. One of the programs at The Dream Center is called “Fuel Your Dreams”, this is for playwrights, and so what we do is we have this program where we teach people how to write plays. We have playwrights who come in and teach for free, young people how to write their plays, and then the end of the program the beginning of the summer we choose three of those plays and we run them at The Sanctuary during the summer. All three. You have no idea what it can do for a twelve year old child to be a playwright and see their play being played out in front of them on the stage in a place like that in New York City. Those are the kinds of creative programs we do. We partner also with other entities that help screenwriting. We have a class in screenwriting, in drama, in acting, public speaking class called “This is My Voice”. I mean you name it, we have it. And cutting edge, and different, with intention, to really push people again to pursue their dreams and be their better selves. Because I'm of the opinion that not only are all of us artists, but we were born artists. We were created to create. So in many ways if we're not creating, in my view, we're not fulfilling the fullness of who we are as human beings. We are part of a creative process and if you're an artist, that means your life is a work of art. Everything you put your hands on becomes a work of art. And that is what we try to inspire young people taking, to do at The Dream Center. So, why am I here? It's always a dangerous thing to give a preacher a pulpit and a microphone because I'll get preachy real quick, but here's what I believe as I look out, and just being in this place, I feel good. And I feel like I'm part of something creative and powerful. You all represent what I believe is one of the last bastions of untamed and unleashed imagination. And creativity. You represent possibilities, especially for people who do not believe that very much can come from them. Too many people that I'm counting in Harlem and the surrounding community live with a sealant over their life. They don't believe that

anything powerful can come out of their experiences. Young people who already believe in the eclipsing of their own dreams, because someone told them what they couldn't do, or who they couldn't be, so we try to change that in the community. But you all have a powerful responsibility, I really believe that. In the midst of the breakout sessions, in the midst of the pursuing funders, because I know that work, pursued very well for programs, and that begins to dominate much of your time, all the time running these theaters and running these programs—beyond that, beyond all of that, you all are not only visionaries and dreamers but you all are cultural architects. That is what I believe. And what you do you have the capacity to reimagine culture, reimagine life, reimagine this world and trust me, I tell people all the time, the wounded soul of this world is groaning for more creative beings. Believing that you, all of you, in some way shape or form, stand in the gap for some people, in ways that give them life. In your work, in your gifts, in who you are. You have that ability to touch lives. Don't ever lose that focus. When the business of theater gets in the way, don't forget the calling of theater, to give life. To inspire life. To capture minds. To change the hearts of people. To put people in contact with ideas and images that give birth to so much in their souls. Why is it, because all of us bear the soul of an artist. The spirit of an artist. The imprint of an artist. And that is what you represent. Whether you know it or not, I've seen it in Harlem with the young people who've been touched by The Sanctuary and by The Dream Center. You can do more in your engagement with community, in your work of transformation, in the community, that can give life in ways you could never imagine. I love being surrounded by artists. I love, you have no idea, this has been heaven to me today, I didn't have to say anything to anybody. Just walking around, being around you all has made me feel good, because you can feel the energy in the space. You can feel the passion and the desire and the fire to do great works and I wanna push you to never lose that. Do not let your work become a casualty of beurocracy. Do not let your work become so focused on survival that you forget how to give life. Don't get lost in the spaces that seek to vye for your attention, that seek to dull your creativity, and lessen your imagination. The world is full of intellectuals. We all are intellectuals. But what I realized is that the world is in need of people that are reckless imaginations. And powerful, powerful creative capacities. So you are cultural architects. You are reimagining what life can look like. You're reimagining what life can be. Through your gift, through you art, through your touch, you help people see what they may not have been able to see. You help people become what they believe about themselves. You help people be the change they want to see. That is what you do and what a tremendous calling, to be a cultural architect. What a powerful calling to be the person who inspires generations to reimagine their lives and see themselves differently. You again, I'mma say it, are cultural architects. I'm a cultural architect. I believe that. And there are three things I'll share with you before I pause so we can do some Q and A. It's what I call the way of a cultural architect. Here are the three things we can write down, points we can get. [I] like to walk away from a talk with some points that inspired you—I looked in the binder, I saw under this section there was a place you could write down what moved you or what you remember, so I'mma give you some stuff to fill out the blanks. Here we go 'cause I wanna-'cause it gotta be productive, all right? 'Cause I can talk about the church, I can talk about The Dream Center, all day. I wanna talk about us. If you are a cultural architect, here's the first thing you must possess. Here it is, number one: a passion for the possible. You must be enlisted in the fight to abolish the impossible. There is no such thing as can't. You refuse to accept "no". You have a passion for this possible, and you make it come alive. In your theaters, in your work, in your

presentations, you have a passion for the possible. In other words, you help people shift from dreaming, to living. Why? One of the saddest moments you can experience when you're having a good dream, you have a good dream, and you didn't want it to end. One of the saddest moments that can happen when you're having a good dream is to wake up, which means that some of the best ideas we have we get with our eyes closed. The cultural architect helps people dream while they're wide awake. With their eyes wide open. That's what you do. You help people dream wide awake and you rebel against the domestication of dreams. Becoming civilized. You are there to inspire new thoughts and new ideas with passion that can shake the world. I tell people at FCBC at The Dream Center all the time, never whisper your dreams. Don't be afraid. Cast your dreams into the atmosphere and make the universe adjust to those dreams. Trust me, it will happen. There's nothing more powerful than when the world must bend to the movement of your dreams. That's what cultural architects do. They help people learn to see the best in themselves and help them see the power in who they are. If you're a cultural architect you remind the people you work with, you give life to. To not ever let anyone put their dreams in check. Don't let anyone try to compartmentalize their dreams. Why? Because the world needs dreamers, but realize this because know there's some dreamers in here—every dream that you have and every time you pursue a dream, it is also an invitation to a nightmare. Which means what? That to see that dream come alive and come to fruition means almost inherent struggle to the process. And I'm sure that more than a few of us in here today who can testify to the struggles in the theater world. The struggles to sustain your work, to keep the theater alive. But you are chasing dreams and you have to expect that. Because if you're a dreamer, you understand that everyone does not capitulate to your dream. That's why you have to fight to see those dreams come alive. That you can do it. Why? Because you have a passion for the possible. Move, when everyone else stops. You keep living when everyone else is content with existing. You're a cultural architect. There's a quote I came across many years ago from one of the theologians, his name is Paul Tillich, and he says this: "he who risks and fails can be forgiven. He who never risks and never fails, is a failure in his own being." Which means that if you're gonna dream great dreams, you must be ready to risk failure. None of us in here have arrived to great places not having failed. Fear is the shadow that looms large over dreams and creativity. It's what we fight daily. So let me hurry up because I don't want them to put the five minute sign up on me. Okay good. So if you're a cultural architect, you have a passion for the possible. That was number one. I'mma come around and check these binders and make sure you put down... Hopefully you ran out of space, right, already, right? Two: if you are a cultural architect, not only do you have a passion for the possible, but you have the commitment to creativity. Must have it. I said it earlier, we were created to create. Because to create is to be fully human. Your very being is a work of art. Everything about you is a masterpiece. Everything about you. You were created to create, to be human is to create. And creativity should be an everyday experience. You should not put your head on the pillow at night if you have not created something. I want you to hear that. Don't sleep being uncreative. Notice I did not say productive. Every day you should be engaged in some work of art in your life. Some masterpiece. And here's the real powerful thing: igniting the passion and the mind of someone else is an act of creativity. You have the ability to do that. My. Creativity is part of our life's work. It is in every breath we take. There is no way you can take a breath and not be creative. I tell people at church, those of us who have been created by God, we inhale when God exhales. It's in that act is something powerful happens, that we're ignited with

the power of the universe, everything about our makeup screams life, screams creativity, screams art. You're committed to creativity. That means that there are times when you put your intellect and your ingenuity and your degrees and everything else you may have to the side and you let your imagination run wild. And then, you let your imagination lead the way. Not your fear, not your doubts, because we know how well to live with those. Because all of us in here knows what it is, in some point in your life, to be overwhelmed with your own inadequacies, and feel overwhelmed by feelings of self-doubt. No, you fight through that, because creativity is always suffocated when we become fearful of what is possible. And so you keep that commitment to creativity. After the meeting is over, you got the news you did not want to hear, the funding is not coming, that is not when you sigh and surrender and you throw in the towel. You wipe the eyes, you start letting your imagination go to work. The greatest things that have come to you in these have come on the tail end of great 'no's. Those persons who heard the 'no's rebel against that. And believe that for every 'no' that is given to a human being, the spirit inside screams 'yes'. That it is possible. So if you are a cultural architect, one: passion for the possible. Two: lemme see if you can remember—one, two—commitment to creativity. Ah, see, good. Then, here's the last one, I'll be done and we'll have a few questions. A hunger for healing. Hunger. That is what makes your work so powerful. That you all are not just theaters; not only are you incubators of creativity and hubs of imagination, you also represent spaces of profound healing. Wounds are mended in your spaces. Hurts are confronted in your spaces. There's something about art that soothes the soul. There have been times in my life where I found myself in depressive moments. And in those moments when I feel like I don't want to move forward, I throw on some Coltrane. Miles Davis. Whom I share the same birthday with, by the way. Something begins to move in my spirit, there's an energy that comes alive when I hear people are artists doing their greatest work. Sade mentioned Freestyle Friday, it's something different—I don't know of any church that has done it. We had a freestyle service, we had our musicians and nothing was planned. We would walk in and just start jamming on the music and everybody would get into it, and then—here it is—we would put a profound question in the lobby of The Sanctuary, we had boards much like this, and the question would be, what are your greatest fears? Or what is it that stops you from being fully human? What is it that hinders your creativity? And people would write their responses, and people would write their responses. We would bring the boards on the stage and my preaching would be now based on the boards. I would begin to pull the lines and responses by the people that would make up the sermon, and that moment it was the utmost moment of creativity and improvisation, and it would make me come alive because I would pull from this person and that person and this person and that person and it crafted a sermon and it all seemed like it was planned. But don't most improvised work of art seem that way? But it wasn't. And I saw people's lives better. That's what you do. You can bring healing to people's lives. It's not just a performance. It's not just a show. It's not just a workshop. It's not just a seminar. It is sometimes a salve to heal the psychic wounds of people who come your way. Sometimes you represent the last frontier before someone gives up. Before someone is ready to give up on life and come to your space. Something about your space can give them hope. Again. Remember this. All great art is born out of a pain of labor. All creativity emerges from struggle. So that you are not afraid to encounter challenges. You are not shaken when things don't work out. Because your deeper calling to bring life outweighs the fear of what won't go right. Your deeper desire to change lives overshadows when politics and money get in the way. Because you're a cultural architect.

When I was a student at Morehouse College in the years, many, many—I have to brag, gimme ten seconds to brag. I have two children; my son graduated from Morehouse College last year and is now in grad school at Duke University, and my daughter is a junior at Spelman College. That's where I met my wife, by the way, and I had to take that moment to brag about my children. I love them. My son is twenty four. My daughter will be twenty one. Pray for me. But I remember our freshman year at Morehouse. I did something that I'd never done: decided to run for office. The decision I made to run to be president of the freshman class was after one convocation and a speaker closed with a quote from Howard Thurman, famous Morehouse man. And that quote changed my life. And every time I feel intimidated or unsure, when I ran for Congress, I remember the first debate—never had a political debate before. I'm going against one of the old foxes of congress, Charles Rangel, former Chair of house of Ways and Means, and at first I didn't know if I belonged here, and then just at that moment before we went out on the stage, this poem came back to my mind. And then I realized something: that I was made for this moment. I was built for this time. Goes like this. Thurman would say, "I'm tired of sailing my little ship far inside the harbor bar. I wanna go out where the big ships float, out on the deep where the great ones are. And should my frail craft prove too slight for waves that sweep those billows o'er, I'd rather go down in a stirring fight than drowse to death by the sheltered shore." Cultural architects. Remember, "no vision and you will perish. No ideal, and you are lost. Your heart must ever cherish some goal at any cost. Some hope some dream to cling to, some rainbow in the sky. Some melody to sing to. Some service that is high." You were born to rebel against insanity. Live and give life. Thank you.