

# **Our Story and How we do Church**

**A Training Resource for Network Pastors**

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## **Part 1: Our Story**

### **Starting Thoughts**

I never thought I would write this story of church planting. It is just my story and the story of many other disciples of Jesus who have given their lives to see that Vine Church would honor Jesus, along with the other churches started from her. We had no intention of being a network of churches, never a thought that Vine would be anything other than a local disciple-making church in Carbondale, Illinois. We just wanted to please Jesus. I was continually shocked by the people who wanted to devote themselves to this goal. They were people who didn't ask for recognition or reward...just to be a part. And together we all played the part that Jesus appointed for us as 1 Corinthians 12 makes clear. The friendships that we've made in the process are precious and too many to name. Jesus didn't leave us alone, although we often felt lonely in the midst of the challenges.

One church has become seven and these churches have become a "no name, no account group of churches." We're "no name" because we don't have a name (profound, right?!!) and are not trying to start a brand or franchise or to get name recognition. We want each local church to have its own name and to effectively make disciples in the city where Jesus has placed it. We are "no account" because we don't add up to much—orphans saved by grace, foundlings who have been welcomed into Jesus' family. We don't want to be famous or well known—just to belong to Jesus and to be found in Him! The sacrifice and pain that many have experienced so that the churches could be healthy and effective is significant. But this is not even worth mentioning compared to the

suffering of our Lord for us. And what a gift of worship to offer before Father when that day comes...that we have given our lives for His name and that others would know Jesus.

Throughout this account, I frequently talk about “hearing God” or “the Holy Spirit said...” or “I felt a nudge to....” I believe that Jesus leads His church through the Holy Spirit. The Bible is the absolute word of God and our standard on all issues of faith and practice. Unlike the Bible, subjective hearing is partial and must be tested with the scripture. Understanding His leadings and His voice is a wonderful process of learning and trusting and risking and admitting that you are wrong when you are. The good thing about writing these stories “after the fact” is that we have hindsight to inform us. There are some things that I can affirm were God speaking and leading with great confidence because time has proven them to be true and helpful in building up Jesus’ church. If you had been talking with me during the process of hearing and testing, you would have heard much more tentative tones and language as we struggled to discover what was next. It has been similar to Acts 16 where Paul was stopped by the Spirit from going forward with a “good plan” a couple of times before he has a vision of the man beckoning him to go to Macedonia. Every time he and his companions suspected that Jesus wanted them to do this or that, Jesus either stopped them or gave the go ahead. At last they went to Macedonia “concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them” (v. 10).

I don’t talk extensively about the many, many times that I was wrong in hearing and Jesus stopped me (and there were a great number of these). The times when we look back and see “that was really God” are much more interesting to hear and to tell. So read these accounts understanding that I am led by Jesus just like you are, and I hear Him in the same Biblical manner laid out for Christians of all generations—vaguely, partially and, at least some times, clearly. For simplicities

sake, I do not go through a Biblical explanation of how to hear and test such leadings of the Holy Spirit each time I tell these events.

And one final thing: I have told this story to the best of my memory and have done my best to accurately include the details. Some of you who experienced these things with me might tell a slightly different version or remember much more detail or just find that my old mind has got it all wrong in some places. But this is how I remember the story and these are the stories that I've told as I've taught the Bible throughout the years. May our lives together be for the glory of God and may there be many other wonderful stories that we live out until he comes!




## My First Home

I visited the church that would become my first Christian church home in April of 1993. As a twenty-nine-year-old Ph.D. student at Southern Illinois University, I found that looking for a church was a painful process! Because I had not grown up as a Christian, the traditions and styles of different churches were foreign to me. Many were very formal and required dress clothes (I was, and still am, not very comfortable dressing up). Others were charismatic to the point of bizarre and scary to me (much of what they were experiencing may have indeed been the Holy Spirit, but in a style that was very difficult for me to take). The first time I walked into the little church that was to become my church home, I was also a bit uneasy with the expression and style of the people and the service. However, I was greeted by a man who seemed “normal” to me. His name was Larry Anderson. We talked briefly, and I felt like he was genuinely interested in knowing me.

The only other thing I remember was the worship! There was a sense of God’s presence that I had not experienced before. I was a bit shaken and wondered at what was happening. Some people had their hands lifted up (before I was a Christian, I made fun of such people, teasing that they were “tuning their satellite dishes”—trying to catch “the signal”). There I stood among them, feeling the presence of the Living God, feeling scared and vulnerable. I cried quietly. It was a bit like going home and something like knowing I was in trouble or needed help or like everyone could see all of my weaknesses and faults. My emotions were experiencing this and, all the while, my mind was objecting to the “human factor” (i.e., the band is not that good, that guy is very weird, I would never hang out with these people, everybody seems very messed up—but not me of course, there are only 20 or 30 people here so it can’t be that good of a church, etc.). Pride and arrogance were to become




my obvious barrier to becoming a worshiper, and they showed their ugly face during that first worship experience.

There was a time in the service where the pastor let people speak out things that they felt God was saying (and then I really knew that they were weird). Someone said something like “I see a picture of a snow cone in a dog house with an old pair of socks on top and a gorilla drinking a latte” (I’m exaggerating for effect, but it really was a bizarre, nonsensical combination of irrelevant images). Strange!! But then a woman, whom I later came to know as  spoke up and said that she saw a picture of a man climbing a mountain and that he was almost to the top and that he should not give up! I was surprised by my reaction because somehow, although I didn’t know how, I knew that the man was me! I knew that God was speaking to me. I had accepted Jesus a few years earlier but had never found a Christian church and was a royal mess and Jesus was helping me. Though I didn’t understand how God was speaking, I believed that he was speaking to me and that I was almost “there.” Later I would find that “there” was the little, strange church of people who would love me though I didn’t deserve to be loved and help me become a man who not only believed in Jesus but also followed Him. I was about to go on summer break from the university and would not be able to attend that church for a while, but the picture—me climbing a mountain and almost to the top—encouraged me throughout those months.

When I returned to SIU in August, a young man named Sándor Paull wanted to visit the church with me. Sándor was a twenty-year-old design student who had become a casual acquaintance of mine during the previous year. We had met in the weight room at SIU’s recreation center, and I’ll never forget his bold attempt at sharing Jesus with me. I just told him that I knew Jesus too, and we immediately struck up a friendship. Though we’re not much alike (e.g., he still lifts


weights and that was one of two times I attempted it), sharing Jesus in common gave us something on which to build a friendship. Sándor had not really committed at any church since his first pastor left the small Baptist church where Jesus had saved him. In those days, he went to whatever church he felt like attending on a given Sunday. That Sunday it was the little church that I had visited the previous spring.

We walked in the door of the run-down storefront and there was Larry again. We said hi, and I introduced him to Sándor. Sándor was wearing a worn out, see-through, skin tight t-shirt that may have fit him in Jr. High. Larry's profound attempt at striking up a conversation was something like, "So...it looks like you lift weights!" And Sándor, missing his cue to be embarrassed about his ten-year-old, outgrown attire, struck up a conversation about muscle building. I remember nothing about the service that day, except that Sándor didn't really like the church and never went back with me again. The experience surely didn't match his more traditional church experience. I didn't see him for several months, but he does come into the story again later!

The next Sunday, Larry and his wife,  invited me to their house for lunch. They were fascinating to me! Both of them had grown up in southern culture; Larry was from Arkansas and  from Southern Illinois—and they both had the accent to prove it! And there I was an overly serious northerner who had to strain a bit to understand them. Larry would look me straight in the eye when he talked and always waited for a reply, listening carefully as though what I was about to say held great importance. I could tell from his strong, calloused hands that he had always worked hard for a living.  was warm, beautiful, and playfully sassy; her eyes twinkled every time she teased Larry (which was every other sentence). At the time, I had no idea that Larry would become my first small group leader and lifelong friend. I just wanted lunch.

So we ate lunch as Larry poked fun at [REDACTED] (something about her learning to cook with a microwave). And she dished it back, unwilling to have Larry one-up her. It amazed me to listen to them teasing each other and laughing at their own expense, their accents making the bantering even more entertaining. I learned that Larry had just turned 50 (very old by my standards at the time—although seeming much younger at this point in my life as I now approach 50 myself). When we finished eating, he asked if I wanted to go “four-wheeling down in the bottoms.” I didn’t know what “the bottoms” were, and I had never been “four-wheeling,” but I went. After driving down railroad tracks and slogging through mud holes, Larry stopped his machine and turned it off beside the “Big Muddy River.” Out in the middle of nowhere with an old man from Arkansas in “the bottoms”.... I was scared! I thought, “I hope he doesn’t kill me and throw me in the river because no one will ever find my body.” But it turned out okay. He didn’t kill me and I learned about hickory nuts; all in all a beneficial afternoon!

Larry and [REDACTED] were so kind. Really, more kind than was comfortable for me. Larry was talking to me in a way that felt like he knew me. My own dad never really talked to me like that. In some strange way, though it made me uneasy, I yearned for the kind of attention he was giving me...like I was really important to him. I’ve since thought “if all Christians would treat others like that, many more people would be drawn to Jesus.” I was still wondering as we drove back to the house, “Are these people for real?” You have to understand, while I had received Jesus, I had not yet experienced His church. I still carried all of my old wounds and pain. I had yet to learn about transparency and confession and mercy and love. I had learned about these intellectually (mostly through reading), but Larry and [REDACTED] were about to take me on a journey of experiencing the wonders of these Christian realities. I was excited and apprehensive at the same time.

Very soon after, Larry asked me if I would like to be a part of a new small group that he was starting (Larry has since told me that I asked him when he was going to start a small group and he answered, "Tonight. Are you coming?" though he had no previous plan to do so. While I have no recollection of this, you probably should take his account instead of mine. While he is older, his memory has always been better!). When I told him that I would come, I had no idea just how small this group would be: Larry and  me and one other person. That first group night was very interesting! Two hicks, an arrogant intellectual (that's me), and a prissy girl who loved tacky "Precious Moments" knick-knacks. What a group! Larry said, "If we're going to be in small group together, we're going to have to get to know each other." I was thinking, "I'm not sure I want to get to know these people." But more than that, I was positive that I didn't want to be known! I was used to life alone. Polite interaction with no depth and no commitment—that's how I lived. This Christian thing, if it was going to go beyond intellectual assent, might be tricky! "Get to know each other." "Help each other." "Speak into each other's lives." They were new concepts for me. Truly a new way to be! I wasn't sure that I could do it. But Jesus had me and wouldn't let me go. He was inviting me forward and, at times, dragging me. I loved Him and wanted to follow Him. He had saved me...really saved me from my sin sickness. I was so grateful. But knowing other Christians was new for me. I had no idea that he was drawing me into a real-life application of the Bible that would change me forever and become the foundation for planting churches and making disciples for Him. And so the small group began.


We talked through verses from the Bible, we prayed together and for each other, and we worshiped. In those days it was the prayer and worship that grabbed me. I was experiencing the Living God as real! He was real in a way that I didn't know was possible to experience when I first surrendered my life to Him. He was blowing my intellectual circuits and breaking my control grids.


Sometimes I would go to Larry and [REDACTED]'s house in the evening and we would just talk for hours; it was so easy to talk and laugh with them...like I'd known them all my life. When it got late, I would tell them that I needed to go (11 p.m. ...which was and is exactly two hours past my bedtime). [REDACTED] would inevitably say, "Let's pray before you go." I can still hear them praying as we started, "Thank you Jesus. You are so good." Then it would happen. It was like heaven entered that living room. I would feel the Holy Spirit's presence; we would begin to pray, delighting in God's presence, sometimes weeping. We would pray for the small group and for the church and for our lives and for more people to know Jesus. Larry would usually have a vision in "living color" (I always loved this, because any visions I ever have had were just vague images, but Larry would see visions in full, brilliant color). We would pray until Larry started snoring...about 1 or 2 a.m. usually. [REDACTED] and I would laugh at him and then we would say goodnight. What amazing days they were. [REDACTED] would tell me over and over, "God sets the lonely in families" (Psalm 68:6 NIV). He had certainly done that for me; knowing Jesus began to feel like I had come home.


Sunday mornings were a wonderful conflict for me. The presence of God during the worship and prayer was so amazing, and I longed to experience more. At the same time, the experience was nearly more than I could take. Every Sunday as the service progressed, I would feel His presence and begin to cry. At first I couldn't figure out why I was crying. Then I began to recognize the movements of my heart. I frequently found myself crying over me. My arrogance and pride showed up so clearly in the presence of God, and I was ashamed of them and sorry. Every week I would say, "I'm not going to cry this week! Everyone is going to think I'm such a mess" (which I was, but I didn't want them to know). And every week when I felt the Holy Spirit's gentle presence, I would begin to feel emotion rise up in me. A kind of longing came from somewhere deep inside; it was like the strong desire to finally be home after being lost for uncountable days. I wanted HIM. I felt my

need for Him more intensely than ever. After a while, I just got used to crying and figured that is what Christians do! I guess the truth is, I've been crying ever since.

## End of the Honeymoon

The small group grew, and Larry began telling me that God was going to use my life.  would tell me, “Steve will touch the nations!” I didn’t know what either of them really meant. I was content to be in their small group; I was content to hang out at their house praying with them. I felt safe. I just wanted to enjoy Jesus like that forever. But after about a year, it felt like Jesus got down to business with me, and I wasn’t sure that I liked it.

One morning as I awoke from sleep, I felt Jesus tell me, “I want you to go to Larry and  and tell them EVERYTHING.” I knew exactly what He meant. EVERYTHING! My whole story. All of my sin and rebellion and secrets. I was never afraid of telling about the good in my life—it was the bad and the ugly that scared me and caused me to hide. I went to their house that evening when they got off work intending to “tell them everything.” I was so scared.

They were so good. They were like parents to me. I was sure that they would kick me out of their house when they heard my story and my sin. We talked about the weather and my dissertation that I was avoiding, about their business, and a dozen other insignificant happenings. Finally,  asked, “Steve, is there something that you would like to talk about?” I must have seemed nervous. It was one of those moments when I knew, “This is it...do or die.” I felt like I was jumping off a cliff; my head was dizzy. If this was the “being transparent” and “getting to know each other” that Larry had talked about that first night of small group, I was pretty sure that I didn’t like it! But I jumped. I started at the beginning and just started talking. I went fast and didn’t give them a chance to talk or ask questions. I looked at the floor as I talked, wondering what they were thinking. All the specifics that I could think of in my twenty-five years of sin before I met Jesus came spilling out. I talked and I talked until I ran out of things to say.



Then came “the moment” that I dreaded. What would they say or do? Would they kick me out? Would I find that true relationship with Larry and [REDACTED] was only for “good people” like them? Would my fears come true that I was no good, beyond help, not really loveable, damned? That moment of silence was awful! They didn’t talk and I had nothing else to say. Just silence! It seemed like forever, though it was probably only a few seconds. And I’ll never forget what happened next.

Larry and [REDACTED] both got out of their chairs and walked over to me. Then [REDACTED] said, “I just hate what Satan does to people!” I thought, “This is pretty good...I’m the sinner and Satan got blamed.” They gently laid their hands on me and began to pray. I don’t remember any of the specifics of their prayers, only that I felt love, mercy, forgiveness, healing, cleansing, hope, and acceptance. It wasn’t at all what I expected! I went home amazed! The next time I saw them, they were all smiles and laughs, like always. It was as if I had just told them how good and faithful I was—like all my sin had never happened. I didn’t know that they saw me through the eyes of Jesus; the One who had forgiven them too was now using them to minister forgiveness and healing to me.

The healing came in many ways. I was living in a little rented house just a mile or two from Larry and [REDACTED], while I was on a research award writing my dissertation. The lot was large enough to have a nice garden, so I tilled up the ground and planted lots of tomatoes (I was dreaming of fresh tomato sandwiches with Miracle Whip on white bread!). It was fun to have something more tangible to do beyond just putting words on paper. I had borrowed some old wire tomato cages from Larry and when the fall came (after eating lots of nice, Southern Illinois tomatoes) had borrowed Larry’s truck to return the cages. Now, understand, it was a NEW truck! It might have been one month old. I very carefully loaded all of the cages into the bed of the truck, stacked length-wise like a pile of logs. I was so proud that I didn’t scratch the paint (I had images of having to tell my dad that I had

broken or lost something whirling through my mind). I then crawled slowly down the mile-long bumpy gravel road to Larry's place, my hands tense from gripping the steering wheel lest I damage the truck.

Relieved to have arrived without incident, I drove around the house under the maple tree on the west side of the house to where I would unload. It's one of the more frustrating things for me in this life: No matter how careful you are to do things right—you can really mess things up, though all of your intentions resist. As I passed under the tree, I heard the bone chilling sound of metal scraping on metal. I was horrified and jumped out of the truck to see what had happened. A low-hanging branch had caught the top tomato cage, pulling it from the stack and scratching the sharp wire feet of the cage all the way down the side of the truck (I mean ALL the way from the cab to the tailgate)!! Further, it didn't take much of an inspection to notice that every place where the wire had rested in the bed of the truck had been scraped through the paint down to the metal! I felt sick like I wanted to vomit, anxious heat flooding over my body.

It was one of those moments when you would rather die than face the truth. How could I undo this or cover it up or blame it on someone else? It wasn't my fault (but it really was all my doing). Another chance for my small group leader and, now, my friend to kick me out of his group—and out of his life! As I unloaded the cages, all of the fantasy of escaping evaporated into the reality that I had to face Larry like a man and tell him that I had defaced his new truck ("Like a man" is just my way of making myself look adult-like. Really, I felt just like a little, eight-year-old boy telling Pop that I had lost his wrench and couldn't remember where.). So, I told him: "Larry, I scratched your truck." Of course he is thinking a little scratch: "It's okay...it's just a truck." I insisted that he come out to see how bad it was, so he did. Calm and relaxed is the only way I know how to describe

his response. “Yep, you sure did scratch it, didn’t you?” It didn’t line up at all with my expectations! Anger, sulking, or a silent stare were all things that I could predict. But this was not a response I could dream up and his words shocked me even more. “Steve, it’s just a truck! You’re more important to me than this truck! I can get it touched up.” He must have noticed my fear of facing him. His words of assurance were hard to take (a whipping would have been more in line with what I thought I deserved). But the impact on my life was profound. The words he spoke to me that day still ring in my mind every time I mess something up. He was my small group leader, and he was a Christian. I was learning more about life than I realized at the time.

I should write some about why I needed so much “cleaning up” after already being a Christian for several years. Nineteen-eighty-nine was the year that Jesus saved me. At the time, I didn’t know what He had in mind or what He would do to me (and I mean TO me ;-). I just needed help. I needed Him. My dad had been killed at work in 1986 and, in the aftermath, my life had spiraled out of control. I was drowning in every way. At twenty-five I was done living and ready for something better than my mess of a life. I had been involved in a religion that had made me a legalist who was trying to get God to like me and, while I at times had the appearances of being good, I was dying inside. I was full of sin and death. I tried to make myself right, but failed every time.

During that time, with my life falling apart, I was taking a class at Central Michigan University—just another day. But someone had left a book on the toilet paper roll in a restroom. I found the book and took it (I sure hope the Holy Spirit told them to leave it for me and that they didn’t come back looking for it ;-). It was “Mere Christianity,” by Clive Staples Lewis. I would lie in bed reading it every night. It was as if something had grabbed me and was pulling me into the truth that Lewis had written. Every chapter, every argument was another nail in the coffin of Steve

Morgan. I felt as if someone was plotting to do me in; it was like every paragraph was strategized specifically to unravel the lies in my mind. I didn't know at the time that Someone really was plotting my death; Steve had to die.

Jesus had planned all along to bring me to the end of my stubborn self. Then one night I read these words: "A man who was merely a man and said the sorts of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to" (Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis, 1943, p. 45). I knew it was over. I was unable to help myself. The case was clearly laid out before me. I believed it. Something had changed within me. Jesus was my only hope for forgiveness and life. There in the dark room with the book on my chest, I prayed, "Jesus, help me! Forgive me for everything. Save me." I'm not sure these were the exact words, but it was something like that.

The amazing thing to me was simply that HE DID! I began to feel changes that I now know come with being saved by Jesus. First, I became obsessed with Jesus; I talked about Him, thought about Him, and read about Him all the time. Second, I became obsessed with reading the Bible. Third, I felt as if everything was now okay, and I would never be sad or sin again (when the honeymoon was over...I learned about the marriage!). HE SAVED ME!

It wasn't really a normal salvation (where someone from a good Christian, Bible teaching, worshipping, praying church was fired up about seeing other people come to Jesus so they invited their

friend, Steve, to their church where he heard the truth about Jesus from the Bible and experienced His presence in worship and made new friends who loved Him and, eventually, was regenerated by Jesus and his new friends were there to help him as he was born again. That's "normal."). I didn't know anyone like that. I just had friends from the old religion (many good friend to be sure), but no one who could help me into Biblical Christianity. I didn't know I was supposed to have help through this process anyway; I didn't know what I was missing. So I read books. One book would lead to another. I read maybe thirty good Christian books during that first year (along with the entire Bible several times). While the reading gave me a kind of knowledge foundation, they could never replace the effects of relational disciple making as God intended and laid out in the Bible.

So...I was a saved, immature, hurting, new Christian when I went to my first church and my first small group. It was like catch up. I was a twenty-nine-year-old man who had head knowledge without the effects of the church. I was a physically grown man with the spiritual maturity of a three year old (my son is three years old as I write this—and it's not pretty at times!!! Thank you God for having mercy on my small group leader!). But then, in my first church home and first small group, I was finally beginning to get real. Now there was a chance that I would actually grow up and become a mature spiritual man who followed Jesus Christ in everything.

During this time, I spent hours in worship and prayer, sometimes by myself and sometimes with others from the small group. I loved the sense of the Holy Spirit's presence in my home. It was amazing that he would be there with me and that I could experience His power during my daily life. One morning I was playing my guitar and worshipping, when I felt like he asked me a shocking question: "Don't you think it's about time you started bringing me your tithe?" I couldn't believe it! I was a poor graduate student, making a monthly stipend of \$800 before taxes. I paid my rent,

utilities, car insurance, gas, and food after Uncle Sam took his cut. At the end of every month my checking account balance was zero! It was tight and I spent no extra money. Now, while I was enjoying worshipping Jesus, he asked me to bring Him a tithe out of my \$800? It was a hard thought. But I knew enough by this point to understand that, though His ways sometimes appear very difficult, he is always good! I tried to forget about the question he had asked (which I had avoided answering), but that day my pay check came in the mail! When I saw it, the feeling and intensity of His question came rushing back. I knew it was really Him and that I must follow His lead.

That Sunday I sat down to write the check—\$80; 10% off the top; my first and my best as worship. But I didn't know how I would make ends meet. I stood at the offering box in the back of the small church, holding my check folded in half (it was a tacky wooden box with a tiny, gold-plated padlock and a slit in the top). I knew that once I dropped it in that box, I couldn't get it out without a pair of pliers and a lot of embarrassment! I held my breath and dropped the check! Whew! That was intense. Now what? Well...the end of the month came and I was alive, my bills were paid, and I had eaten (though possibly less). Guess how much was in my checking account? Not \$80...not \$800...still zero! I was so proud of myself; I had obeyed Jesus and survived. The next month when my paycheck came again, I had a sinking feeling in my stomach as I asked, "Do I have to do it again???" Month after month it got easier and easier, until it was a joy to respond to Him with tithes and sometimes offerings above and beyond. It became the foundation of loving the One who provides more than I loved the provision. I learned that he is faithful and, to this day, he has always provided enough.

After about a year in the group, Larry asked me if I would lead another small group. The group had grown much larger and was no longer technically small. While I wondered if I could

really do it well, I was excited to find out. I had made numbers of very good friends in the previous year and some of them would go with me to start the new group. It was like being pushed out of the nest and going on a great adventure at the same time. I wanted to see what Jesus would do with me. At some point, I received the spiritual gift of leading others to Jesus. With faith and confidence, I invited people to trust in Him and surrender their lives to Him. [REDACTED] was the first. I was so excited! Amazing that I was now seeing what Jesus had done to me happening in people around me. Shortly after [REDACTED] his mom received Jesus. It amazed me. It was so miraculous to watch a person go from not believing (or not thinking Jesus very real or very necessary) to weeping with longing for Him as they surrendered and accepted His forgiveness and love from the cross. Grace completely undeserved, yet generously given to save us from our sin—coming home! I loved getting to be a part of this process. I thought, “I want to do this the rest of my life.” But I had no plans to be a pastor. My plan was to be a Christian who taught at universities and led tons of students to Jesus. I hadn’t yet thought about the need for healthy local churches for the people that were coming to Jesus.

## Wrecking my Plans


In October of 1994, I had several significant dreams. In one I was walking west down Highway 13 into Carbondale, Illinois (Larry Anderson was walking about 100 yards behind me). As I approached the city limits, all of the stores and building were gone on both sides of the road. There were corn fields as far as I could see. In the dream, I knew that the season's corn had just been picked. When I looked closely, I saw that new corn was already up about three or four inches high! I was shocked. I thought, "How can new corn be up? It's fall! How will it survive the winter?" Then, as I looked and wondered in the dream, I heard a voice say, "In those days, the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman, and the one planting by the one harvesting" (I'm not sure what version of the Bible that is, but it's how I remember it being said in my dream). I suddenly woke up and felt the Holy Spirit's power in my bedroom. I knew the words that I had heard were in the Bible, but I didn't know where. I found them in Amos 9:13. In the English Standard Version it reads: "Behold, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed." When I found it in my Bible that morning, I immediately understood. I've told the story for years in these words: "There is going to be a quickly-maturing harvest in Carbondale. People would be saved by Jesus and immediately turn around and invite someone else to trust in Him."

Let me explain my understanding of the dream and the images of this verse of the Bible. I know a little about farming, so the images that God was using to speak to me made sense. The "reaper" is the one who harvests a crop. When does that happen? Usually in the fall (at least with feed corn...always in the fall). Then the ground lays empty for the winter. The "plowman" turns over the soil to prepare it for planting, right?! When do you prepare for planting? "Spring" you say



(you're very good)! The plowman and the planter do their job in the spring. Then they wait. Summer must pass to give time for the crop to grow, mature, and ripen. Then, in the fall, the reaper harvests the crop again. Are you with me? But the image in Amos is shocking! The reaper is "overtaken" by the "plowman"! What's he doing here? Usually he waits until spring! And the planter is overtaken also. By whom? By "the one treading grapes." That's another reaper; one who harvests the crop. It's a quickly maturing harvest. In my dream, the reaper had picked the corn, but the plowman and the planter had already been there. Right behind the reaper; they overtook him—caught up! So the corn was already up and growing! Guess how fast that corn would have grown if my dream had played out.

Before my very eyes! The reaper was right behind the planter already harvesting a crop that had just been planted. I can hear Jesus saying, "Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together" (John 4:35b-36). It's a quickly-maturing harvest! People coming to Jesus and quickly growing to maturity, producing a harvest of even more people. What an amazing time to be a part of Jesus' church!

So my dream caused me problems beyond just understanding that there would be a quickly-maturing harvest in Carbondale. Why was I in the dream? And what was Larry doing following me into Carbondale? At the time, I was living in a small town called Christopher, near Larry and s house. I was writing my dissertation; almost done with my goal so I could graduate and teach. I had big plans for myself! Good pay, summers off (lots of road trips ;-), and teaching! But after that dream, I felt a nagging sense that Jesus wanted me to plant a new church in Carbondale, near SIU. I could feel my Lord leaning on me, applying pressure, asking me to give Him my life again! Give

everything up. Stay in Carbondale, flush my Ph.D. down the toilet, and risk everything for Him! I was scared! But he wouldn't let up. Night and day I felt the question pressing against me: "Will you do it for me?" I told my pastor, Jamie Moyer. He said it was God. I told Larry and [REDACTED], pleading with them to agree that I was out of my mind and that I should forget the whole thing. They thought it was God. I didn't know what else to do. Jesus had saved me from my sin and from hell! I was such a mess and he helped me. That day in my bed reading "Mere Christianity" I had given Him my life. The old Steve had to die. Jesus gave His life for me. "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). This verse has become the theme of my life. It's not my life anymore; it's His life! He gets whatever he wants. You want me to withdraw all of my applications for university jobs, stay in Carbondale, and plant a new church? No money, lots of student loans, no prospect of a job, ruining my reputation in the academic world? Sounds like a great idea, God. Let's do it!

I'll never forget running into the chair of my dissertation committee in the department. Her name was [REDACTED]. Such a sweetheart! She asked, "How is your job search going?" To understand how important this is, you have to understand something about the academic world. She had been coaching me and mentoring me for four years. Her reputation had become wrapped up in my success. She had been pouring into me and helping me to become relevant in my research. If I land a great job, she would celebrate her success with mine. So, she asked me how the job search was going. I was so consumed with the struggle to obey Jesus that I hadn't planned for this moment. Jesus didn't say a word about how to tell [REDACTED]. He had acted as if it was all about pleasing Him and not [REDACTED]. I was lost for words. So I awkwardly mumbled, "Uh...I've withdrawn all of my applications. I'm going to stay in Carbondale and plant a church." Then I desperately added,

“Maybe I can get a job here in the department!” I could hear my own words as they dribbled off my lips; I sounded ridiculous and felt like such a fool! What could she say?

She laughed. Not the “how exciting and I’m so proud of you for obeying Jesus and risking everything” kind of laugh. She laughed *at* me. Then she clearly told me that the department didn’t hire their own graduates because they like to “cross-pollinate intellectual thought.” She walked away clearly upset. I thought, “I’m an idiot!” It was the first time I remembered looking foolish doing what Jesus said. I didn’t like it very much. I would rather have everyone think I was amazing and intelligent and successful and promising! Thanks Jesus! I feel great.

## Pieces of a Puzzle

I should backtrack a little bit here, because it's important. During the summer of 1994, I was struggling with Jesus over another issue. I was thirty years old, still in school, poor as could be, and UNMARRIED. I felt like I was behind in every area of my life. I wanted to meet the woman that I would love for the rest of my life. I was afraid of being alone; mostly afraid that Jesus would want me to be alone. It was not a thought that I was excited about. So I felt like he told me to fast and pray for twelve days. He wanted me to accept His will regardless of whether I liked it or not. I needed to work through my heart issue and be willing to be single the rest of my life if that's what Jesus wanted. It was a hard fast!

Since I wasn't getting much work done on my dissertation, I spent my time worshiping, praying, reading the Bible, running, and wishing I could eat! I love eating just about as much as I love anything. But I felt close to Jesus and could feel my resistance to Him melting as I struggled during the fast (I didn't want to fast and I didn't want to be single; as I submitted to Him in the first area, the second was lining up too!). After five days I had a major setback. My will was weak and my food was calling to me from the refrigerator. I broke down that evening and ate almost everything in the house! I felt ashamed. What should I do now? I was sure he had asked me to fast, but I failed. I was afraid that I would have to start all over—twelve more days. When I prayed, it felt like I was just to keep on going—do the last seven days! What a relief; I was thankful for grace!

I'll never forget the day I broke the fast, victorious in simply completing the last seven days without another gorge. But more importantly I felt my heart surrendered to Jesus on the issue of being single. For the first time ever, I could pray "I am willing to be single the rest of my life, as long as I have you" and actually mean it! I had prayed it many times before because I knew it was

right. But I never meant it! Finally I did. I felt peace and joy. I was proud of myself and confident that Jesus was proud of me. I remember driving on a highway in Southern Illinois, happy and content as I prayed. Suddenly I heard Jesus speak in my heart and mind clearly: "You will meet the woman you will marry in September." I was shocked! My heart was beating fast. "But Jesus, I'm finally content! Could that really be you? I'm okay being single." I seriously doubted whether or not it was really Him, but it had definitely not been something that I was thinking. I wrote it down in my journal and forgot about it as well as I could.

Another important thing happened that summer. I went to a conference at which John Wimber was teaching (he was the founder of the Association of Vineyard Churches). I loved going to conferences to hear good Bible teaching and worship and receive lots of hands-on prayer. It was a great conference. At the final session, when it was time for prayer, I was ready! There were so many people there that I figured I could go up for prayer no matter who they invited first because such a crowd would go forward and I could just "blend in" (unless it was for menstrual bleeding or short people).

I was wrong! When John began inviting people forward for prayer, he said, "I felt that the Holy Spirit wants us to pray for all of the Asians here tonight first!" I thought, "I can pass for a lot of things, but definitely not being Asian!" My heart was bad and I grumbled about it. I wanted to receive prayer! I wanted Jesus to fill ME! Hundreds of Asians were streaming down the aisles while I wrestled with my attitude.

All of a sudden I started weeping! Being too intellectual for my own good, I was thinking to myself, "Why am I crying?" Then I realized that I was crying for THEM! All of the Asians who were taking my prayer! I felt a kind of love and compassion that I had never felt. The truth is that I




had never been able to relate to Asians. I always had Asian students in my classrooms when I taught as a graduate student. I had 6 or 8 Asians in my class that very summer. They never talked with me, and I made little effort to connect with them. They were all good at math and computers and I was good at neither. I thought "we have nothing in common—no basis for a friendship." There I was weeping for them; crying for a group of people that I did not know or care about. Then I heard the Holy Spirit whisper "I CALL YOU TO ASIA." I stood there trying to get my mind around what I was hearing. Suddenly I realized that I was not to receive prayer that night; I was to go up and pray for them instead. So I did. I prayed for a number of different people and there was evidence of God's power on them. But that wasn't the amazing thing. The best was yet to come.


The conference ended, and I went back to teach the summer class. But everything was different. I didn't feel any different toward the Asians in my classes. I don't think I acted differently. But the change was dramatic. They WANTED to talk to me. They stayed and talked with me after class. One of them invited me to eat an Asian dinner that they would cook for me. The group of six or eight students from the class was there plus others whom I had never met. We laughed and talked. I ate food that I had never considered edible (and thought most of it was actually good). I really enjoyed being with them. A couple of weeks later, I was surprised when one of my students (X) called me and asked "Steve, are you Christian?" I told him that I was, and he asked if we could talk. When we got together, he told me his story. (X) was not a Christian himself, but when he had visited a friend of his in Los Angeles (a former teacher). He was not a Christian, and she took him to her church. During the service they prayed for him and...his words are best: "I saw Jesus and he excused all of my sins. They told me that Jesus had already prepared a church for me and that I would get baptized there." He had experienced a vision in which he saw Jesus and had a dramatic salvation experience. Now he was asking me if I was a Christian and if he could go to

church with me and whether or not he could be baptized! I thought, "I like this!" He was baptized in a couple of weeks and became a dear friend. That September he took me to the Chinese Bible Fellowship at SIU, and I continued to meet many new Asian friends.

During that fall, a beautiful Chinese woman from Taiwan had caught my attention (I mean strikingly, shockingly, take your breath away beautiful!). Her name was [REDACTED] (pronounced "[REDACTED]"). She would catch anyone's attention! I had never even considered marrying someone from another culture. It was out of my box of possibilities. But by Thanksgiving that year, I found myself asking another Chinese friend if I would offend anyone by asking [REDACTED] out for a cup of coffee. He laughed and said it would be fine. So in December I did. I'll keep this part brief (and I should acknowledge that [REDACTED] tells the story a bit differently. However, my version is the accurate one!). We went out once in December and a couple of times in January after the Christmas break from school. At the beginning of February, I was browsing through my journal and ran across an entry from the previous summer: "You will meet the woman that you will marry in September." Remember THAT? I had forgotten, because September had come and gone with me not meeting anyone that I thought I would marry. Must not have been God after all. Then I started counting back: "When did I meet [REDACTED]" My friend [REDACTED] had taken me to the Chinese Bible Fellowship with him. I met her there. I'll never forget it. She was sitting right behind me. After the meeting was over [REDACTED] introduced me to her and she smiled her beautiful smile and said "Oh, you are Steve." But when was it? I started looking back on my calendar, putting the pieces together. IT WAS THE LAST FRIDAY OF SEPTEMBER! I was terrified. I couldn't marry someone from another culture. Her family was in Taiwan. Our kids would be biracial, multicultural milkshakes! Too many challenges; too many differences! So what did I do? I told her I could not see her anymore. It was that simple. Too scary! Nope, can't do it. (In her version of the story, just so you

know in case you hear it—but understand it's not really what happened—she says that I told her “I want to try other women.”) Regardless, it was over; I told her that I couldn't see her again (oh, did I mention that it was February 14, 1995? Valentine's Day. That part is true—just in case she brings it up—I already told you!).

That same day, my atheist, banker brother (his name is ) fell from the roof of his house. Like my life before Jesus, his life was a mess. I had dreamed about him during the previous fall. In the dream, I was walking up to his house and found it was an utter mess. There was no glass or screen in the front door, so I just walked in and left it open. He carefully closed the frame of a door (as if I had been careless not to shut it). I was then in the basement of the house with  and looking at the rotted floor joists and sill beams (if you don't know...these are important structure that holds up the house). Then before my eyes I watched the structure repaired to like-new condition. It was like fast forward in a movie. One moment it was a devastated mess and suddenly it was all new! Then I heard the words “repaired without human hands!” I woke from the dream with the conviction that I must start praying for  But now he had fallen and was badly hurt.

I hate calls like that. It reminds me too much of the call I received when my dad was electrocuted in 1986. Too terrifying and no good answers about how it's going to turn out. Way too many bad outcomes are possible, so my mind ran wild with all the images. I was scared. My family had barely survived my dad's death. It had devastated us and we were all still healing from the ugly pain. Now this! Another disaster.  lived in Northern Michigan in the town where we grew up. Ice had built up on the eaves of his house and needed to be removed so that it did not cause water to push back under the shingles. So here you go...Morgan brilliance at its best! He stood with one foot on the top of a ladder and one foot on his twelve-foot-high roof, banging on the ice. What happened



next is no surprise; he slipped! A twelve foot fall placed him head first onto the concrete sidewalk. He laid there conscious but unable to move, face down in the snow. It was some time before his roommate found him and called an ambulance. At the hospital, MRIs and tons of other tests revealed severe spinal cord damage high in his neck. He was paralyzed from the neck down—couldn't move anything. The doctors said that he would never walk again and quite possibly never move again. We were all horrified.

But there was one good thing. He couldn't move! You have to understand, [REDACTED] wouldn't even let you mention Jesus' name. He would either get angry and walk out or tell you to shut up. He wasn't a nice atheist! He wanted nothing to do with God. But now...he couldn't move! He couldn't walk out. He had to listen to me talk about Jesus, and he was desperate! So I tried. One problem...he could still talk! I would sit in his hospital room and read the Bible out loud—of course key verses about Jesus. Then he would yell at me to stop, and I would politely say, "Oh was I bothering you?" Nice brother I was. I'm joking now, but we were all terrified at what the accident meant for [REDACTED] and for us. Picturing taking care of him for the rest of his life was not pleasant. We didn't get along that well. For him to imagine never moving or walking again must have been unbearable. In the midst of all of this, he did agree to one thing: Prayer! He would let us pray for him. So we would lay our hands on him and ask Jesus to heal the damage in his spinal cord. Tears would run down his cheeks as we prayed. Every day we prayed for him. While the doctors gave little hope, we hoped. And to our amazement, [REDACTED] walked home from the hospital, almost completely physically healed, two and a half weeks after the accident. The doctors didn't know what to say. We rejoiced! The day [REDACTED] walked out of the hospital, I was boasting to him about how Jesus had healed him. I'll never forget his response: "I know something happened...but I'm not

going to be a Christian! I'm more geared to be a Buddhist or something." I just said, "Whatever [redacted] whatever!" I knew better than to argue. He went back to his life, maybe a bit more sober.

Oh yeah, I had ended the dating relationship with [redacted]. I had no intention of dating her again. We were getting ready to start the new church. I was leading a small group in Carbondale. [redacted] and [redacted], two young men who had been saved by Jesus during the previous year, were committed to being a part of the plant. I was tuning my guitar one evening before anyone had arrived for small group, and I heard the door begin to open. Before I could look up to see who it was, I heard the Holy Spirit speak in my heart "there is the woman you are going to marry." It was [redacted]

While she had not been attending the small group since we had stopped dating, she showed up for group that night. Jesus had saved her during the previous fall, and He had healed her of long-term depression (and it remains healed to this day). But I had no plan to marry her (even though she was the most beautiful woman I had ever met). Too many complications with a cross-cultural marriage. But my nagging Lord wouldn't leave me alone. He loved me too much. By the first of June, I asked her to marry me. It was that simple. "Let's get married in August!" ([redacted] says that she still can't decide if it was a demand or a question). The church plant was underway. I was broke. Her family couldn't come. So we just got married on a Friday evening at my rental house on Michaels Street in Carbondale. Larry and [redacted] were there, [redacted] as my witness, and [redacted] had two friends. Our pastor, Jamie Moyer, did the wedding ([redacted] told me later that she thought about not showing up...and I don't blame her. I didn't even give her a diamond!). We went to Giant City State Park, a few miles south of town, to a cabin where four dozen roses awaited my new bride. It was the most romantic deal I could pull off at the time (I've gotten much better!). The next night we shared our

wedding cake with the small group that I was leading and went back to our cabin. In the morning we returned to now “our” rental house and led the Sunday morning church plant team meeting with the dozen or so people involved (I won’t mention that “our” rental house was shared by my former roommate, [REDACTED]). What a romancer I was, eh?!! [REDACTED] still says I owe her a honeymoon! She’s right! But four kids and fifteen years later, we’ve decided that the marriage really works!


Sometime earlier that summer, my brother, [REDACTED] called to see if he could come to visit me. Because we had little relationship at that point in our lives, I thought it might make for a hard week. So I was relieved when I checked the calendar and found that I would be out of town at a Christian conference. I told him that I was sorry it would not work. He asked me about the conference: “What do they do there?” I’m thinking, “He’s not a Christian and doesn’t want anything to do with Jesus. I’ll tell him in graphic detail, and I’m sure he won’t come!” So I told him about hours of worship and preaching about Jesus from the Bible and lots of time to have people pray for you. To my amazement he asked, “Can I come?” What could I say? I reluctantly told him, “Yes.”

When the week came, I expected tension but something was different with [REDACTED] He was quiet and...what was it? I couldn’t put my finger on it. Humility! That’s it! He was different. He wanted to learn and felt like he really wanted to understand this Jesus thing. We didn’t talk much about it when we were together, but I could feel the difference. On the first night of the conference, there was a speaker that I did not know. HE WAS AWFUL! Gruff, rude at times, loud and obnoxious. I was irritated by him and his style. At the end of his “as much as I could handle” preaching, he pops the questions: “Does anybody here want Jesus? If you do, get up here!” I’m not exaggerating. Just like that. I thought, “Great! My brother is here and needs to surrender to Jesus and now some bone-head preacher blows it!” I’ll never forget the moment. [REDACTED] reached down and

took a drink out of his can of Diet Pepsi that sat on the floor under the seat in front of him. He set it back down, slapped my knee, got up, and walked up in front of a couple of thousand people! I sat there with my jaw dropped. Rude preacher, average explanation of the gospel, a crummy invitation, and Jesus saves [REDACTED]! That night gave me hope for my own preaching! That night Jesus really saved him. Amazing! I baptized him a short time later in Lake Michigan with my unsaved family watching in wonder at what was happening.

Sometime later, [REDACTED] told me more about the day he had fallen. While he was laying face down in the snow, he couldn't move but he was very alert. He said that he could feel "someone standing over him," and he knew for certain that he must not die; he knew that if he died, he was in "big trouble!" Through the experience, he became aware of the reality of eternal judgment and a right fear of God penetrated his heart. All of this was a work of grace—the love of God for [REDACTED]. Severe mercy was unfolding in his life so that he would know Jesus and be rescued from sin and death and hell. He was regenerated, saved, born again—a new man!

So I left [REDACTED] in Michigan with the simple direction to read his Bible and do what Jesus tells him. And he read...the entire Bible a couple of times. He couldn't stop. Then it gets good. He called me one day and says, "Steve, I think Jesus wants me to quit my job and sell my house and move to Carbondale to help with the church plant. Can I come?" Now I'm in a spot! [REDACTED] saved was great. Having a Christian brother who lived 600 miles away worked. But I didn't know what it would be like to be in the same church or, more clearly put, TO BE HIS PASTOR! So I told him, "Don't you think you should apply for a job first?" His response was quiet with a bit of hurt in his voice: "Steve, I thought you told me that I was supposed to do what Jesus said." Now Steve, the pastor, was at a loss for words. What do you say to that? "Okay." Someone asked if they could buy

his house without him even putting it up for sale! And before I knew it,  was living in Carbondale as a new Christian and attending the team meetings for the church plant.

Another very important thing happened that summer. I woke up one morning and, in that weird time between being asleep and awake, I heard the Holy Spirit say “Go find Sándor Paull and ask him if he would like to do the things that Jesus did.” It was subtle, just like every Christian feels His nudges, but I was pretty sure that it was Him. Sándor and I hadn’t really stayed in contact, but I knew that he worked in the “Men’s Fragrance” department at Famous Barr (a department store). I thought that I had better do it that day before I chickened out!

I’ll never forget walking up to the counter. Sándor was standing there, right behind the Drakkar, sporting his clip-on tie (he swears it was a real Windsor knot, but don’t believe him for a minute). Then I froze. I hadn’t thought about how stupid it would look to ask Sándor such a poignant question standing in front of a wall of cologne. I didn’t know what else to say or how to make it sound better, so I just asked: “How would you like to do the things that Jesus did?” There was a moment of awkward silence. Sándor simply answered, “Sure, I would like to.” I told him that I was starting a new small group that week for the church we were planting and he could come. He agreed and, as they say, the rest is history. Jesus grabbed a hold of him and shook him out of his rebellion and independence. He experienced God’s power dramatically and, to this day, is one of my dearest friends. He has been such a help to me that I can honestly say that I can’t comprehend how different my life would be if Jesus had not given me Sándor as a friend.

As I write this, I am amazed again at how Jesus builds His church one person at a time. A key interaction or a nudge to be obeyed; a series of events that all play together to bring about a divinely orchestrated outcome that we could never pull off. I look back at these times and wonder at the

miracles that can only really be seen in hind sight. They seemed so ordinary at the time. I was often unwilling or completely sinful in my responses. It makes me wonder how many joys I missed because I failed to listen to Jesus or to trust Him. Yet, our sovereign God carried out His plan for His own glory and our joy. Jesus was putting the pieces of the puzzle together.

## And so it Begins

While I was doing my best to obey Jesus and follow His lead and nudges, don't misunderstand. It wasn't easy! A follower of Jesus lives in dependence. When he asks us to trust Him and to risk ourselves, it's actual risk. On one hand we're perfectly safe in His love and protection. On the other, there are real dangers and trials that come our way. I just don't want you to think that because we obey him it should always be easy or that he MUST make our way smooth. I did what he said about withdrawing all of my applications for university teaching jobs. I was humiliated in front of my Chair. But I still had no job; I had no way of supporting myself or the bride that I had married. It scared me! This is the time in the process of obedience when I start my "try to manipulate God routine." "I've done everything that you said. You told me to...so you have to...!" This time my issue was trusting Him to provide for me.

I remember the day so clearly. I was laying on my face on the floor praying. It was the kind of prayer where I'm in despair and begging as best I can. I genuinely didn't know how I could ever pay back my student loans, support my wife, and have the money to plant a new church. It felt like "you've asked me to do something that's too hard!" As I cried and prayed I was convincing myself more and more that it was too hard and that God would not help (this is not the way prayer is supposed to go). To understand what happened next, you have to understand a bit about my upbringing. My dad was a hard-working, frugal man. Any time I would ask him for money, he would say, "What do you think I am...the Bank of Italy?" I don't know where he came up with this—we were far from Italian (British and German, with a little Swedish and Norwegian thrown in—but NOT Italian). I lay there crying, thinking God was very much like my dad (while loving me—a bit hard and demanding). Then I heard Him speak to me: "Steve, don't you know I OWN

THE BANK OF ITALY?" It shocked me out of crying. I sat up. "Really? My Father OWNS the Bank?" Something about those words undid the effects of my dad's words and caused me a kind of peace and trust regarding God's provision that I had never experienced before. It was all God's and God was my Father! I could trust Him! There was no check in the mail, no instant job, no unexpected inheritance...just peace and trust. This was His deal and He would take care of me. But the job did come.

Remember how [redacted] my Chair, had laughed at me and told me that the university didn't hire its own graduates? By about a month after the encounter, a teaching position opened up in the department. I applied and they hired me! Amazing. They don't hire their graduates, but they hired me. Little did I know that the job would provide the money to support us and the new church, but also that it would be the place where Jesus would begin saving students for Himself.

There was another big scary deal about which I was praying. Would Larry and [redacted] go with us to plant the new church? It was forty-five minutes from their home and they were a part of the little church at which we had first met. But then there was the strange dream about the corn harvest where Larry was following me down Highway 13 into Carbondale. I knew that they were praying; they were asking Jesus what they were to do. I held my breath. Then one day we sat in their living room and Larry asked, "Can we go with you?" CAN YOU??? I was so excited! Their humility always amazes me. They weren't sure if I would want them to come? I desperately needed their help! I don't remember what I said, but I'm sure it was something that added up to a "yes." Then Larry said, "We want you to be our pastor and we will follow you." Now I was embarrassed. They were twenty years older than I was (at least Larry was...I think [redacted] was still about my age ;-). They had been MY leaders. It was because of the demonstration of Jesus' love, mercy, and patience



through them that I was even making it as a Christian. Now I'm going to be their pastor? They would become two of the most important relationships of my entire life. What would I have done without them? I've tried to imagine what it may have been like a couple of times and, I can tell you, it's not pretty! So Larry and [redacted] were in...they were helping take care of young people, and they were especially effective at loving the internationals.

The Taiwanese students from my summer class had now become good friends (and had introduced me to many others). We spent time together watching movies and eating. But [redacted] was the only Christian among them. Then one day I felt like Jesus wanted me to start a Chinese small group. I continued to pray for the opportunity to lead these friends to Jesus, but so far no one was interested. Then late one night when we had just finished watching a movie, one of them suggested that we tell ghost stories. I hate ghost stories and since it was my place, I was about to say "no way!" I felt a nudge that was something like "let them tell their ghost stories, and then you tell yours." So I waited. They told creepy stories of ghosts in Taiwan to which I tried not to listen. Then, about an hour later, I felt another nudge. "Now tell yours." By that time I realized that he meant the story about Jesus crucified, raised from the dead, and sending the Holy Spirit into the church (I called Him Holy Ghost, just to make it work). After telling my story, he nudged me once again: "Invite anyone who wants to hear more back tomorrow night." So I did! Voila! Instant Chinese small group!

The next night nearly all of them came back! Not only that, within a week they were being saved. [redacted] was the very first! At the end of group, she just started weeping in repentance. The rest of them all watched in amazement. The next week was [redacted] Within a month, nearly all of them had been saved and were inviting their friends to do the same. It was stunning to be a part

of it. Weekly people were saved, demons kicked out, bodies were healed, and deep Christian friendships were made. It was an amazing summer—the summer of 1995. I graduated, got a job, married [REDACTED], and started a new church. Sándor was now a part of the church plant, [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] were committed, my brother moved to help, Larry and [REDACTED] Anderson were in, and people were being saved. Jesus was building His church (it was only a whopping twelve or so people, but it was a start). But there was still one problem—we needed a worship leader!

[REDACTED] or [REDACTED]? I couldn't decide. [REDACTED] was my brother (that was a strike against him). He was a recovering quadriplegic (another strike), and he was a pretty good heavy metal guitarist before meeting Jesus (strike three—I hate heavy metal). Plus his fingers were still stiff as a result of nerve damage from his accident. So he really couldn't play guitar all that well anymore. [REDACTED] on the other hand was NOT my brother, no nerve damage, and was a really good guitar player. While he had just started coming around the church plant, he had a good voice and tons of skill! I was sure it was [REDACTED].

Then one night we were at Larry and [REDACTED]'s praying. As usual, I was talking with them about my concerns on building the church. A worship leader was at the top of the list and I talked through my thinking about [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. After my processing (which probably only took a couple of hours), we prayed. And while we were praying, [REDACTED] has a vision of the old story “The Tortoise and the Hare.” As she was describing it, she said “I think [REDACTED] is the tortoise and [REDACTED] is the hare.” The Holy Spirit rested on me with power and I knew that she was right. The next day I asked [REDACTED] to be the worship leader and told [REDACTED] about my decision. In those days, I hadn't yet been hurt by enough people to realize that a person's heart condition was a HUGE deal in church leadership. I knew it from the Bible, but not in practical experience.

Within a few days, [redacted] fell apart over not being chosen. I never saw him again. [redacted] slowly and steadily learned how to lead worship and how to build a team. His heart was amazing! He never once bucked me, even with my overly involved approach to leading a worship leader in those early days. God used him to lay the foundation for all of these years of worshiping God and making worshipers for Jesus. I am so thankful that Jesus protected me from choosing a man whose skill was good and whose heart was bad. Since those days, I've learned to ALWAYS choose a good heart over skill or gifting. With a good heart, the skill and gifting may grow, but a bad heart spoils it from the beginning.

During the fall of 1995, we weren't really a church yet. I had no idea what I was doing and we had no outside help. I read a few books about church planting and searched the Bible for clues on how to proceed. The thing was...everyone said that we couldn't do it. "Carbondale is too hard," they would say. When I shared the vision that Jesus had given us that the church would be made up of half students and half working people, they would say "it can't be done!" Usually they would follow the statement with "the students just take and don't give anything." I may have been naive at the time (and in many ways my courage came from naiveté), but I was turned off by their response. I really believed that we could build a church that was 50/50. A church where young people and more mature people would radically commit to Jesus together and see that hundreds of university students were saved and commissioned for church planting. But it was yet to be done in Carbondale.



By November the Association of Vineyard Churches had approved us as a church plant. The meeting where I first met the Regional Overseer to ask if we might plant a church in Carbondale was interesting. It was probably five minutes long. He asked what we wanted to do, and I shared the vision that Jesus had given me (the nutshell version). He told me that he didn't think we could do it,

but we could try if we wanted. We told him we would like to try and so he agreed. I left that meeting deflated and thinking “If this is what support is going to feel like, I’m in big trouble!” We could try, but if we die in the process, don’t expect anyone to throw a line—just drown quietly. That may not be exactly how he meant his response to come across, but that’s how it felt. To be fair, I should say that once we were up and running (growing 30 to 50 percent annually), he became very supportive of what we were doing.

So...here was the great benefit of being approved as a church plant. We would receive a check for \$2,500. To me, at the time, it was big bucks. We were a huge church of twelve people throughout that fall. I was broke from graduate school. Then the Holy Spirit spoke very clearly about our first great venture in using the money: “Give it all to another church plant!” We gave it to another church starting in the St. Louis area. The first check that was written from Vine’s account was for \$2,500 to another church plant. It was the beginning of a value that has become foundational to us. It’s not ours! We risk everything to obey Jesus. Money is just a means to the end of building up Jesus’ church. Our security, as church leaders, is in Him and not in the size of the church savings account. Extreme generosity is the way to be. Churches and church planters who don’t live this risking, giving, generosity lifestyle miss out on one of the greatest joys that I’ve experienced as a pastor—seeing Jesus provide for His church against all odds! It starts with every church planter and pastor personally obeying Jesus in giving beyond what they can afford.

One of the things about my wife that is most beautiful to me is her generosity in giving. Before we were married, the Holy Spirit spoke in her heart one day during worship and asked her to give her last \$30,000 to the church plant. It was the last of the money her family had provided for her education. She was leaving her own country behind to marry me (a man with no money and some

pretty stout student loans) and now she was giving up the last of her financial security to follow Jesus. I couldn't believe her faithfulness! Generosity like this is a kind of beauty like none other. The widow whom Jesus pointed out to the disciples because she put her last two coins into the temple treasury—all she had to live on. Barnabas selling a piece of land and laying all the money at the apostles' feet—no wonder they called him “son of encouragement.” The woman that I was to marry, selling out to Jesus—just enough left to pay for her final semester of college and then dependent on Jesus for everything. This was the first of many times that Jesus would ask for nearly everything we had for His church—and then provide us with what we needed as we obeyed Him.

Another thing about  that has overwhelmed me through the years: At just the right moments, God has used her to speak wisdom and truth to me. Sometime during the first year we were married, I had been away from her at a conference. I remember the conference as one where I was constantly pleading with Jesus for answers on how to plant the new church. Over and over at the conference, those who prayed for me talked about “building a foundation.” The night I returned home,  was already sleeping. I slipped into bed next to her. She suddenly rolled over, sat up, and shouted at me: “Build a big foundation and you won't have to protect yourself!!” Then her head fell back to her pillow sound asleep! She didn't remember it in the morning. But her words became words by which I've lived. I knew that the foundation was people; a foundation of well-prepared, deeply-loved, faithful leaders in His church. If I could build into people in this way, “I wouldn't have to protect myself.” I would be safe. Others would watch my back. It became the directive to build the church relationally...a foundation that would last.

The model of healthy local churches that we value did not come about because we were so smart. Most of it we stumbled across. Some from reading, some from leaders that influenced me,

some from the Holy Spirit's direction, and some from just practically thinking through what made sense. Ralph Neighbors' book "Where Do We Go from Here?" influenced me a lot on the importance of having a small group model. But I would lay awake for hours trying to figure out how we would structure our groups. How would we raise up leaders relationally? How do we multiply groups? How do new friends get into groups? I had a huge poster board depicting how new people would be invited to small group and get connected in friendships before attending the Sunday service for the first time (however, we found that almost no one went to small groups first; they came to the Sunday service to find out whether or not it was even worth risking relationships in small group). I would be up in the middle of the night praying and crying before God for wisdom and direction on what we were doing. I wanted so badly to please Him and to build something that would last. I laugh now when I think about all of my strategies and plans that failed, yet Jesus was always leading and getting His way.

When we were trying to come up with a written purpose statement, I got our key leaders together for a planning day at Larry and [REDACTED]'s house. I had a clear idea from the Bible on what the purpose of Jesus' church was, so we were using some of the key texts to clearly state what we were doing as a church (Matthew 16:13-20; Matthew 22:34-40; Matthew 28:16-20; Ephesians 4:11-16). It was an agonizing day for everyone but me (I was actually having fun). Sándor and [REDACTED], my two key young leaders, both fell asleep on the floor in different corners of the room (must have been an engaging planning day!). But at the end of the day we ended up with: *Love God. Love People. Live it out!* (it's interesting now to see "Love God. Love People." being used by so many churches. Must have been from the Bible! ;-)) *Making Disciples. Helping them Grow to Maturity. Teaching them to do what Jesus did. Worshiping the Living God.* We've tweaked it here and there over the years, but the basic purpose has remained.

Once we had our purpose statement, we needed the image. I laughed when I saw a framed poster of the old “guy on the rock” a few weeks ago. It was funny to see him with his mid-90’s fanny pack and cuffed jean shorts! Actually, we had gone out to “Garden of the God’s” (a park with cool rock formations) with our own “models” to get a good image. Only none of our models looked any good in the pictures. While we were out there, we saw a couple of guys who where rock climbing that had “the look.” We paid them \$10 to pose for our pictures. One of them became “the guy on the rock” that we used in all of our ads and poster for years! The only thing I remember about him was that he worked at a lumber yard someplace in Wisconsin (I guess we had better plant churches in the Dairy State someday to pay him back).

I’ll never forget our first Sunday service. It was the last Sunday in April of 1996. According to church planting conventions, we really were not supposed to start public services yet. We were too small. But I felt like the Holy Spirit told me to start, so we did. We had a grand total of 18 people in a conference room at the old Holiday Inn in Carbondale. We had been meeting up until that point in our living room on Sunday mornings for “team meetings.” We would all sit in a large circle on about five couches at the rental house on Michaels Street. Most of them were new to church and more recently saved. Worship was new to almost all of them. So...the first Sunday in the Holiday Inn was their first time ever sitting in rows of chairs. You might think, “What’s the big deal?” Well, so did I! I closed my eyes to pray as we were starting the service and while I was praying every one of them left their seat to stand with their back to a wall!! They didn’t want anyone standing behind them to see them worshipping! When I opened my eyes, they were all gone; the seats were empty! I thought, “We’re never going to be a real church!” Later that week, I coached them in why it was important to STAY AT THEIR SEAT SO THEY DIDN’T LEAVE THE GUESTS ALL ALONE. I think they understood! Maybe it was a good thing after all that we only had a couple of guests that first Sunday.

I won't tell you about the guy who played a maraca by hitting it on a Bible to keep some rhythm because we didn't have a drummer (it's utterly amazing that we ever succeeded in starting Vine Church).



## **A Lot to Learn**

Along the way there were key moments when the Holy Spirit would speak, and they have been burned forever in my memory (and that's amazing if you know how bad my memory really is). Like the day I was driving west on Highway 13 near the old downtown area of Carbondale. Just as I bumped across the infamous railroad tracks, I heard the Holy Spirit say, "I am going to let the church help tear down the walls between black and white in Carbondale." As I researched the history of race relations in Carbondale, I learned that the dividing railroad tracks had been a line for generations that separated the areas where whites and blacks lived. At the time, there was only one African-American student who came to the small church. Everyone else was white or Chinese. Years later, Sándor would be the man whom God used to begin fulfilling that beautiful promise. Now it's a major focus of the Vine's purpose and mission.

And there were so many other promises. I would walk on SIU's campus for hours praying. As I would pray in the Spirit, in my mind's eye I would see flowers and plants bursting out of the ground, symbolizing the new life that he planned to bring to the students. I had visions of huge tornados moving through town like the power of God that he would release. As I prayed, I could envision the days when Vine Church was sending church plants all over the country and to different parts of the world. He promised over and over that he was bringing us "the cream of the crop" the "brightest and the best," promising young men and women that would give everything for Him. We weren't very practical about these things; we just believed that somehow Jesus was going to do them (even if it was like making something out of nothing—God is good at that!). But God seldom seems to be in a hurry.


It took us a year to go from 18 to 30 people! All of you church planters can breathe a sigh of relief that the church you lead is growing faster! Imagine TWO YEARS to go from 6 to 30! No wonder I was praying and crying when I should have been sleeping. It was tough going. The next year we grew to 60 or so and it was the largest church of which I had ever been a part. At one point, [REDACTED] and I had meetings in our home six nights a week (five small groups and one group leaders' meeting). It was a good thing we didn't yet have kids! And the church kept growing. People would come to Jesus, and we baptized them in a hotel swimming pool. I remember baptizing Scott Joseph and [REDACTED] in a junky hotel pool that was so brown that you could barely see the bottom (before they were "the Josephs"). It worked though; they still follow Jesus!

One evening during a leaders' meeting, I had a profound experience that was to dramatically impact my thinking about leadership in Jesus' church. Someone had been praying for me about leading the church and I found myself lying on the floor with my face in the carpet. As I laid there with God's power on me, I saw a vivid picture in my mind of giant, horizontal saw blades whirling back and forth just above my head. The image was so real that I was afraid to move; I could hear the sound and feel the wind from the spinning of the blades. It was a terrifying picture and I felt a holy fear and awe at the power of my God. Then I heard the Holy Spirit speak: "Lift your head up and you'll lose it!"

The image, the sound, and the words worked powerfully in my prideful heart. I knew that he was serious. I must keep my head down—fly below the radar—never self promote—humble myself or be humbled. I believed all of the texts in the Bible cautioning leaders about such things. But now I could feel it. The fear of God had gripped me, and I sense how seriously he held His own glory. The responsibility that he had given me to lead His church was a terrifying charge. I trembled at His

words: "I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols" (Isaiah 42:8). And "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever" (1 Peter 1:24-25). I could hear Jesus say, "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" Matthew 20:26-28). I wept at the fierce mercy of a holy God and prayed that I would keep my head low, always bringing honor to Him.

Over the years, this lesson has played out in our values regarding church leadership. Stay out of the newspapers and let others take care of politics; we proclaim Jesus and make disciples. Always be training your replacement and hold your responsibility with an open hand. Train others around you who have the gifting and ability to surpass what you can do. Resist empty titles; we value the function not the title (how many people I've told, "Please don't call me Pastor Steve!"). Even function at less than one hundred percent of your ability if it means being able to replicate what you do in others! If you do things that only you can do, you will become a superstar (and we don't need any more superstars). Don't grow mega-churches; we would rather have ten churches of 1,000 than one church of 10,000. Keep our heads down! It was a constant challenge to make decisions that would build a healthy church that would glorify God.

Some of the challenges seem funny now. Like our worship leader who would go out in front of the Holiday Inn before the service to "have a smoke" (along with a few other church members). It drove me crazy. I wanted so badly to go out there and tell  that he had to stop smoking and quit influencing people toward such behavior (now at this point in my life and experience, I would not let him start leading if he still smoked). Every time I would begin to say something to him, the Holy

Spirit would warn me, “Don’t say a word!” I would argue, “But he’s doing it right out front for everyone to see,” but I wouldn’t say anything. Then one day [REDACTED] was doing something with the music equipment that was stored in a trailer at my rental house. I went out and his mood was stormy (with thunder and lightning). I asked him what was wrong. To my surprise, he responded, “I’m quitting smoking.” I decided to gently probe further, if I could do so without getting struck, so I asked, “Why?” Then the words that I wanted to hear: “GOD TOLD ME I HAD TO!” I knew that he would do whatever God wanted, so I was really relieved to find out that he was quitting under Divine orders! I made the mistake of asking him why he was grumpy. [REDACTED] proceeded to tell me in a rage, “I don’t want to quit. I like smoking!” I went back in the house with a huge grin on my face and let him continue slamming out his nicotine withdrawals. Ah...God finally busted our worship leader. I was very happy.


One of the hardest things for me in the early days of the church was losing students for the summer or permanently through graduation. The church was small and we built real friendships so carefully and intentionally that losing even one dear member was painful. I remember when a young man named Mike Berardi was graduating from SIU’s engineering program. He was deeply devoted to Jesus, and I had great hopes that he would stay in Carbondale to get a job and continue to help as a leader in the church. But he was offered a job with a large company in central Illinois and decided to leave. I was wrestling with God over losing him. Then on his last Sunday before moving, I was standing during worship and I felt the Holy Spirit’s correction of my heart: “For every one you send willingly, I will bring ten more like them!” I thought, “Really?” That’s not a bad deal! I had been unwilling to send people like Mike willingly because I wanted to keep them so badly (and I felt a desperate need for their help building up the church). I was willing for God to move the trouble makers and the uncommitted, but not the devoted. Now he was telling me to do the opposite. Be

willing to send the best—the most faithful. I have operated out of that promise for all of the years since, and God has been faithful to bring so many more. Later when we were badly in need of a children's director, I was excited when Sándor felt that God might want us to contact Mike Berardi (who was a successful engineer at that point) and ask him to return and help us. After letting him go, we got the "ten more" AND we got Mike back! It was a good deal!


But there were other situations that didn't promise to have such a good outcome, like the young men who were endangering every young woman that came to the church with their confused dating practices! Who would these men be? Oh...just our key leaders again. Sándor, [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. With Sándor, I was just happy that he was no longer dating the woman he attempted to bring to small group the same night he invited [REDACTED] (now known as [REDACTED] Paull). I'll let him tell you the story about how he took his shirt off to paint right outside [REDACTED]'s apartment window and then, after drawing her attention with his scandalous evangelistic methods, invited her to this new church. I won't describe for you the look of horror and offense that I saw as I sat on my front porch watching this beautiful [REDACTED] walk up from one direction while Sándor and his girlfriend approached from the other. I wouldn't want to describe all of that to you; I should leave it to Sándor. Thankfully he quickly wised up, dumped the one and married [REDACTED] (you can ask [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] yourself about their dating adventures while trying to plant a church). When all these pieces come together, you'll better understand why I told the team members involved in planting a second church that they couldn't date for the first year! I was a nervous wreck as a rookie pastor thinking that these guys were going to mess it all up, but when the dust all settled they each married the right person in the end.


And there were other learning experiences as a pastor that left permanent marks. Like the time some of Sándor's unusual friends visited for the first time. The man had a large beard and looked like he had not bathed or shaved since Woodstock. Two of his teenage children were with him. After the service, he approached me and asked if he could sing "Amazing Grace" because his wife was on a plane to Israel and he was concerned for her safety (if you can't add up the logic, don't worry...I couldn't either). But new pastors are stupid!! I wanted to get my way (he definitely doesn't sing) without having him find out that he wasn't getting his way. So I said something like, "We don't do 'special songs' here but why don't you just stand here facing the front and quietly sing the song under your breath to God and I'm sure he will hear it" (pretty good "my way/his way strategy" don't you think?). Well...it back fired! I walked away feeling very skillful in my communication brilliance (after all, I was a communication Ph.D.), when suddenly I heard the bellowing words of "Amazing Grace" VERY LOUDLY through our sound system! Our crowd of first timers that morning (probably two people) turned to stare with mouths wide open. I bolted to the front, grabbed the microphone from him, and told him that he couldn't do that! And he began to yell at me, as he angrily walked all the way down the aisle toward the door, something about "preaching for years before you were born" and "who do you think you are" and "you have no right."

I was shell shocked! I felt like I had been run through with a long knife and was bleeding profusely. I sat down in the back row of the room when all of the commotion had died down and held my head in my hands. "It's so unfair! Why do people treat me like this? How come you don't protect us more?" My prayers made sense to me, and I felt comfortingly sorry for myself until the voice of my Father broke into my heart: "IF YOU EVER SUBJECT MY PEOPLE TO SOMETHING LIKE THAT AGAIN...." He didn't finish His sentence, but he didn't need to. I really wasn't interested in hearing the last part of that right then. I thought "What do you mean,

turning the situation on its head like that? What did I do wrong?" But the truth of my failure was clear. It was my job to protect Jesus' people from that kind of thing. My main goal was to keep everyone happy and not have to tell people hard things. Jesus' goal was to protect His people from wing nuts! If I was going to be a pastor for Jesus, I had better get with HIS program instead of following mine.  Anderson laid her hand on my shoulder and prayed for me while I repented of my chicken-hearted ways!

## Big Changes with the Morgans

In May of 1996, I began to feel nudges that it was time for  and I to have our first child. When I asked her about it, she said that she was not ready and wanted to wait until finishing her last semester of school. So I just asked her to pray. She decided that we should pray together and see what Jesus said (probably confident that He would agree with her). So we prayed. At the end of the time praying, she asked me, "What did you hear?" I told her I thought we were supposed to conceive in June. Her eyes widened in shock. When I asked her why, she told me, "I thought He said in the sixth month!" (Which is a Chinese way of saying JUNE). I was glad that Jesus sided with me! ;- ) So...we got about the hard and dutiful work of conceiving a baby (difficult, but somebody has to do it).

The first of July brought a positive pregnancy test, and we started into parenting with excitement (for me) and uncertainty (for ). And after about five weeks, her uncertainty began to prove wise through a morning sickness with a vengeance! It started with her running out of the house screaming, "What are you doing?" as I brewed our morning coffee! The smell was intolerable to her. She began literally puking around the clock, so sick that she could hardly get out of bed (who called it "morning" sickness?). While she would drag herself to class most days, the rest of the time she was in bed. I began to wonder, "What happened to my wife?" Trips to the grocery store to find the food she could actually keep down were utter failures, and I began to grow large, as if pregnant myself, consuming all of my frustration with food that she couldn't eat!


Different people started telling me that they had a dream or vision or had heard the Holy Spirit say that it was a boy. I was praying about what to name our child, and I too was sure that we could confidently stick with boy names. One day while laying in bed praying, I heard the name



“✕” pop into my head. What a name for our little boy (✕) later told me that in Chinese it meant “grace” or “celebration after victory”). Then we had the ultrasound. After thoroughly inspecting our minjature baby, the technician asked, “Would you like to know the gender?” We confidently told her we would love to know (sure that she would confirm our clear communication line to God). “It’s a girl!!” were the words that filled our ears. Both of us were so shocked that we couldn’t talk. It wasn’t that we didn’t want a girl. But we had been talking to a little boy for a number of months and now...he was really a she! To make it more laughable, I had been teaching a series on “Hearing the Holy Spirit” and talking with the church about how our hearing is partial and fallible. That Sunday I stood in front of the church and announced the living proof of how wrong we can be trying to hear God. To this day, maybe as a reminder of my fallibility, I’m ALWAYS wrong on baby genders (if you want to know your babies gender, ask me what I think and you can be confident it is NOT what I say). We named her ✕ and she was our beautiful baby girl—the fulfillment of much promised joy. Somehow people seem to think that having children makes a person more mature (while it’s not really true, the appearance of maturity can have its benefits). So with the birth of our first child, more young parents with babies began to trust us and come to the church.


## One Giant Step Forward—A Building of Our Own

By the time the church reached 100 people (probably 1998), we had a real space problem in the Holiday Inn. We tried to do two services, but it was a total flop. We did an afternoon service, but nobody would come. The space was just not large enough to get a good “critical mass” at each service. We had to get bigger space, but there was none to be found. We looked everywhere. Finally, while I was at a retreat, one of my leaders told me, “Well...you’ll have to buy land and build a building.” It hadn’t occurred to me that we could pull off such a feat, but I took him seriously. It had to be close to campus, have enough acreage to expand as we grew, and cheap enough for a church of mostly college students to afford. No problem!

 and I had recently purchased our first house. It was a nice little house just off Wall Street in Carbondale. We had been living at the rental house on Michaels Street since we were married and through the first years of planting the church. I was ready for a place of our own with more privacy. This house was ideal because right behind it were nine acres that had been donated as wildlife preserve by an elderly woman on her death bed. It was perfect! Nobody could see me from my back yard and there were acres of woods hiding me. I loved it. Then one day, as I was leaving our house and turning onto Wall Street, a “For Sale” sign appeared in front of my wildlife preserve (I thought “either someone lied to me or that woman decided to live!”). I immediately felt a nudge to buy that land for the church. But because it was my backyard and it was all wooded with a steep hill blocking access, I quickly dismissed it. Every time I drove past I would feel the nudge and every time I would dismiss the thought. Finally, I was bothered enough by the thought to call the realtor about it. It was zoned for single family residential only and was considered “unbuildable” because of

the hill and the ravine that ran up the center of the property. But the price was right!! \$37,000...even I had enough faith to imagine us coming up with that much!

Finally, I talked with Larry about it and then the board. I'll never forget the meeting. We met in the woods on the land. After we had walked around the property, Larry asked me, "Are you sure you don't mind the church being in your backyard?" I agreed (with trembling in my heart), believing it was the right place. The engineers said that we could move the hill to fill in the ravine. We decided to do it! Shortly afterwards, we announced to the church that on the next Sunday we would have an offering to purchase the land. Everyone was excited and the offering was around \$40,000 (at the time it was the biggest offering I had ever seen). We paid cash for the land. But the building wouldn't be so easy!

We needed a loan. A couple of banks kindly turned us down. Then one day  (our bookkeeper) and I walked into a bank to meet with their vice-president of the loan department. We showed him our paperwork and told him our plans, expecting another rejection. But he just simply said, "We would like to work with you on this." I think I even asked "Really?" He said he meant it, and we walked out of the bank stunned. We wanted to borrow \$750,000 and we needed \$168,000 in cash and pledges upfront to secure the loan. But how could we possibly come up with that much money? The church was at least half students and most of the rest were very young professionals. Rumbling through my head were all of the voices of those who told me "you can't build a church with students." But we had to try!

It wasn't a grand "giving campaign." We just announced to the church that we would have an evening with dinner and worship where people could give to the building and make three year commitments for the down payment. I couldn't believe that the bank would accept pledges as part of

the money, but it was a good thing for us that they would. There were probably 70 or 80 people at the dinner in the Carbondale Civic Center. We ate, the band led worship, I talked to people for a while about what we were planning to do. Then everyone turned in their checks and pledge cards. I still thought, "There is no way we will make it without a sovereign move of God on the scale of parting the Red Sea." We waited while several board members counted. When it was all added up, the offering was \$167,900; we were \$100 bucks short (and one of the board members threw that in!). Can you believe it? EXACTLY what we needed!

As the pastor responsible for the church, I often imagine the worse possible outcomes (probably not the gift of faith in action). But, at this point in my life, I've seen Jesus do this over and over! Provision! Not skill in doing a persuasive giving campaign. Not just a couple of people with resources who give the whole amount. No super-intelligent planners who can figure everything out. Just God leading His people! Miracles and stories of sacrifice. Like the multiplication of the loaves and fish. A little bit was multiplied into enough to pull it off. If you ever hear anyone say you can't plant a healthy, growing church with half college students, tell them that they are wrong. I have been utterly amazed over the years at the fierce devotion of disciples of Jesus who happen to be university students at the time. I've watched them give everything they had. This was the first of many times that I would see a group of young disciples (it's called a church) share the responsibility of paying for Jesus' mission. It amazed me then and it does to this day. So we began building a facility for the church in my backyard.


I was excited about the building. The process of laying out the floor plan and deciding how to best use the 12,000 square feet was exciting! It felt so huge compared to the conference room at the Holiday Inn. It felt like we would never be able to use so much space. While we were working out

the details for the plans, I got the church involved in clearing underbrush to prepare the site (from which several people had nice outbreaks of poison ivy). At that point in my life, I had not seen the work of a bulldozer so I thought we were being a great help. Then the bulldozers came!! Massive trees on about five acres pushed over, piled, and ground up into tiny bits in a day!! We watched with our jaws dropped, wondering why we sweat so much with all the work of clearing. Then came the hill and the ravine. Amazing how they pushed the entire hill that made the site “unbuildable” back into the ravine, compacting each layer with huge machines so that we could build our building. We still laugh about all of our hard work we did together clearing the underbrush!

Rain setbacks and fickle construction workers drove me crazy! I was so obsessed with the process that I couldn't help but look out my window every time I passed. Even at night, when all the workers were home sleeping, I would look out the window to check on progress. Slowly the tin can of a building began to go up. There is nothing like the feeling of a new home! We couldn't believe that God was so generous as to give us, what felt like, a great cathedral. We loved Him so much and people were coming to Jesus. Now he was giving us a place of our own in which to make disciples for Him.

By the time the building was finished, we had around 120 people regularly attending Sunday service in the Holiday Inn. It was so exciting to move in! Everything was new. People around town were talking about “the hotel church” that was building this new place. It was right across the street from campus—walking distance from the tower dorms (although I don't think more than three students ever actually walked—a testament to young, American strength). And we were so thankful for what happened next!

The church had been growing fast enough that I was pleased. But I wasn't prepared for how the new facility would impact growth. We started doubling every year. People came from everywhere—most of them were unchurched or hadn't been committed in a church for years. This was important to us, because we didn't want to just draw Christians from other churches. We wanted to bring new people to Jesus. It was as if so many had heard about us but didn't trust that we would make it. Now that we had a building, they figured we were there to stay so they came! I knew the concept of "pioneers" and "settlers." The risk-takers come early in a church plant. Later, when things are more established, people come that tend to play it safer in life. This includes married people and parents with kids who have more stress in life and less energy to risk new relationships. They started coming and it felt like we could do no wrong.



During this time, our second daughter,  was born. What a gift! She was calm and gentle and almost never cried (when child #2 comes along, these are the kinds of things that cause young parents to fall down and worship, acknowledging that God must really love them!). We almost named her Sunshine, for that is the kind of light she brought to us. It felt as if we had God's favor on us in every way. We had a good marriage, two beautiful daughters, and the church was flourishing. God kept giving us gifts that demonstrated His love and grace toward us.

One of those gifts came at a conference where I had met a young man named Ben Powers. I immediately felt a connection with him and a sense that he was going to be a part of what we were doing at Vine. Sándor and I were the two pastors on staff as we moved into the new facility, but now I believed that we were supposed to bring Ben on when he graduated from seminary. We met his wife, Tonya, and felt like God was putting something together. Because they had been living in the Chicago area, it was hard to believe that they would move to Southern Illinois. But when they visited

it was as if they had always been with us. They accepted our offer to join us and added a wonderful sense of fun and play and joy to what Jesus had already been doing to build His church (any that remember the “Saturday Night Live” cheerleader skit that they did to announce a retreat, will understand vividly).

## Planting Churches


From the beginning of planting Vine, the Holy Spirit had made it very clear that we were to be a church that planted many other churches. We had talked and prayed about planting from the start, but we had no idea how to do it. The model that we had learned from our years in the Vineyard was our only perspective. In an oversimplified nutshell it was, "If you think you're called to plant, give it a try and we'll give you \$2,500" (in later years their screening process for planting did develop). I now think of this approach as a non-relational, low investment type of church planting (if you try and fail, we are not out much. I don't mean this description to sound too critical; everyone was doing the best they knew how to obey Jesus and plant more churches. I just don't believe it's the best approach).


Noble and  Staley had come to Vine during the Holiday Inn days. As they came in for the first time, Larry Anderson met them at the door. They told Larry that they had moved to Carbondale for school and were looking for a church home. All through the service, Noble tried to figure out why he felt as if he knew the man who had greeted him. Before leaving, Noble approached Larry to ask if he had ever been to a place called "Perch Bay Resort" in Canada. He said that he had and, to their amazement, they began to put the pieces together. Eight years earlier, when Noble was just a boy, they had been at the same resort. Larry had taught Noble and his brothers how and where to fish on that river. Now they stood talking, years later, with the mysterious sense that Jesus had brought them together again. Noble and  had found their church home.

They were kind and warm and willing to follow Jesus. Noble was finishing up a teaching degree at SIU and they had agreed to return to Decatur (their hometown) to begin a family as soon as he was finished. Everyone liked Noble. He is the kind of guy that you trust the first time you meet



him. It wasn't long before he was leading a small group that was growing. I wondered very soon after they started attending Vine whether he might be a church planter. So I watched and prayed, hoping that he was. As I was trying to figure this out, I visited his small group one night. They were hosting a "building party" for the married housing in which they lived. All evening I watched Noble as he interacted with his unchurched neighbors, wondering what Jesus was going to do with him. Then near the end of the party, Noble got up and, after getting everyone's attention, explained about the small group that he was leading. He invited everyone there to come in the most warm and winsome manner that you can imagine. I was shocked at his gifting to do so and knew that night that he was called to be a pastor. But he was graduating soon and I didn't feel like I had enough time to work with him.

I tried to persuade Noble to stay in Carbondale longer to train for church planting. He had all of the raw materials, but I worried that he was underdeveloped and that he might not carry the values as thoroughly as would be needed. But when Noble and  decided that they had to move back to Decatur to start a family, I rushed it. I probably wanted to plant our first church too badly, and the "give it a try" approach looked pretty good at that point. So I encouraged Noble to go ahead and move back to plant a new church (with no team, little money, insufficient training). My inexperience caused me to make some major mistakes with that first plant, which in the long run resulted in a lot of pain. I'll write more about this later. At the time, we felt like we were finally entering the next stage as a church—we were planting more churches.

This was the period of time when Jeff and  Miller came for the first time. Jeff was a graduate student in opera at SIU. When they first came, I was doing a series on giving and they started tithing before they surrendered to Jesus. I always remembered that Jeff received Jesus during

the giving series, but Jeff says my old mind is compressing the events. He says that a month or so after they first started attending was “the day.” Worn as my memory is, I’ll never forget the image that is burned in my mind. That particular Sunday, I felt a nudge to invite people to surrender to Jesus, and Jeff was one of those who were being saved. I had lunch with Jeff that week and heard his story. I was amazed at the love of God to rescue and regenerate. At that time, I had no idea that Jeff was a church planter.

During this same time, Tony Ranvestel came in also. He was overconfident and strong, a former college football player who was now a graduate student at SIU. Tony had big plans for himself; he was going to complete a Ph.D. in biological science and become a professor. Having accepted Jesus during his undergrad years at Augustana College, he was raw but ready to be a disciple of Jesus (as long as Jesus didn’t mess with his plans too much). One Sunday, shortly after he started coming, I ran into him as I was coming down from the front after the service. I may have met him before that day, but I don’t remember interacting with him until then. When I saw him, I immediately felt a whisper from the Holy Spirit: “He was thinking ‘I wonder if I could do that’ while you were teaching.” So I asked Tony if that is what he had been thinking. The Holy Spirit’s power fell on him, and I told him that it was Jesus and he was indeed going to preach. What fun to see Jesus moving in another man who would one day plant a church!

Scott Joseph graduated from SIU, and we invited him to come on staff as a pastor. Like many who would follow, he faced the challenge that Jesus gave to the first fishermen apostles: “Come, follow me...and I will make you fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19). All his life he had dreamed of being a commercial airline pilot for United Airlines like his dad; it was not just his dream, but a dream that they shared. I remember talking with Scott about how he would tell his dad that Jesus was

asking him to be a pastor and to give up his flying career. Scott went home for the weekend and, while sitting in the hot tub, broke the news that was sure to disappoint his dad. I was so proud of him as he risked the disapproval of his father to obey the One who had saved him. When he returned from the weekend he seemed exhausted like a young man returning from battle, but content as one who had done what was right. Scott's dad had supported him and encouraged him to do as he thought best. And years later, after planting High Rock Church in Bloomington, Indiana, Scott had the privilege of seeing his dad surrender his life to Jesus.

Aaron Kuhnert received Jesus during this time also. He had been invited to Vine by a French international student named [REDACTED] who had surrendered to Jesus some months earlier. They worked together on the "Saluki Patrol" (that is, the campus pretend police). [REDACTED] had asked him over and over to come to Vine, being turned down each time. Finally, he agreed to try it. Aaron had a tough background: parents divorced when he was young, step-fathers, irresponsible mom...so he really raised himself. These experiences had formed in him a kind of hard, cold independence; you could feel from him an attitude of "I don't need anyone, and I dare you to try to get close to me!" Hard nut to crack!

While he had said that he would never become a Christian, his heart began to soften after just a short time of being surrounded by real people who followed Jesus. He was tormented by nightmares, drinking way too much, and was very unhappy. But then Jesus saved him. Just like that the shell cracked and the Holy Spirit filled him and he began to be transformed. It was amazing! As with so many others that I've seen come in over the years, I said wrongly about Aaron, "He's tough...I don't know if Jesus will get this one!" The change in him was breathtaking. He immediately began inviting his old friends to Jesus and after a few months he was leading a small

group (I heard recently that this was Ben Power's doing...It obviously broke all of our usual cautions of "at least a year" of believing before leading other people). Now years later, Aaron is married, a father, has led many small groups and entire Discipleship Communities as a pastor, and is now planting a church at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. What a God we serve!

It is amazing that Jesus would save us, no thanks to our goodness or abilities or pleasing lifestyles, and then transform us though we don't quite know how. Aaron was one of hundreds of people coming to Jesus and receiving the life that he promised. What an amazing time to live through! I remember those days as some of the most exciting of my life. Everything continued to roll on in one exciting event after another. I loved the feeling of momentum; I wanted to live with that feeling for the rest of my life. It's so much more fun when things are going well, than when life is hard.

## An Unexpected Turn of Events

Then in December of 2000, right before Christmas, things got hard. [REDACTED] had been telling me for a couple of months that she [REDACTED]. But [REDACTED] always dismissed it as “you’re too worried.” Finally, [REDACTED] At first, he

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

I was horrified! A kind of fear like I had not experienced before gripped me. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] I was so scared that I still struggle to describe it. I researched [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] Because it was right before Christmas, [REDACTED]  
was off so they scheduled [REDACTED] after the New Year—January 2, 2001.

I spent most of my time crying. I could think of nothing else; I couldn't sleep. A week before [REDACTED], a group of leaders and friends from Vine came to our house to pray for [REDACTED] ([REDACTED] and [REDACTED], Sándor and [REDACTED] Paull, Ben and [REDACTED] Powers, Scott and [REDACTED] Joseph—that's all I can remember). They began to pray as she sat in a chair in our family room. I cried. They continued for a couple of hours, praying three things repeatedly: 1) change it from [REDACTED] [REDACTED] 2) [REDACTED] 3) let it "[REDACTED]" Over and over they prayed, prophesied, and repeated these three requests. I remember [REDACTED] leaning to someone and saying, "[REDACTED]" I was thinking, "Right! They are [REDACTED] [REDACTED]" Then near the end of the two hours [REDACTED] said that something was moving inside. She said, "It feels like my insides are rolling over and over." Scott Joseph and [REDACTED] had their hands on her abdomen and both physically felt movement [REDACTED] [REDACTED] Maybe Jesus was really healing her! But when [REDACTED] laid flat on the floor to see if [REDACTED] [REDACTED], it was.

The morning [REDACTED] was excruciating. My sister, [REDACTED] was watching [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. Mom was there, Larry and [REDACTED], and some other friends also. After they prepped [REDACTED], the doctor came out to the waiting room. "I want to remind you of how serious this is." He went down the list of [REDACTED] and told me he would come out to tell me before [REDACTED] [REDACTED] (I asked him if there was anything else, but he ignored my sarcastic question). He also told me that it would take many hours. After assuring me that he would do his best, he left [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

I couldn't sit in the waiting room. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I paced in the hallway outside the doors [REDACTED] I prayed and walked back and forth restlessly. After an hour and a half, I was in the waiting room with the others.

The doctor walked in and my heart sank. He had said that he would come out [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] But his face looked happy! Then he spoke the words: "We [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I couldn't believe the words I was hearing.

He used the exact words they had repeated while praying: "[REDACTED]" We all cried with relief and hope, where before we had felt hopeless. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I was filled with thanks to Jesus for His mercy, and I was very aware that he didn't have to be so kind. He was good whether [REDACTED] lived or died. He had already saved us both and loved us so much. This was like birthday presents when it's not your birthday—such mercy! He had healed her.

## Growing and Maturing


The next three years were good. The church grew to 300, 400, 500 and just kept growing. It was one of the easier times in my life. I was fat (which was not good) and had settled into a routine. I only had to do the jobs that I was best at with the church. Sándor says that I was depressed every October and it's probably true (I'm not sure why it was October...maybe just a convenient month to be depressed??!). It was a good thing that God had placed many godly men around me to help. But there was no reason to be down; everything was going so well. With [redacted] again, [redacted] and [redacted] doing great, and the church flourishing, I look back on those years as a time of relative contentment.

It was during this time that we planted the second and third churches out of Vine. Jeff Miller's church plant story started much like Noble's (that is, I made a lot of mistakes). Jeff and [redacted] were growing as Christians and as leaders. It was wonderful to watch their progress and I had great hopes that Jeff might be a church planter. But he was quite certain that he was to be a famous opera singer...and had the ability to pull it off! People would tease me regarding the potential planters like Jeff at Vine: "Jesus loves you and Steve Morgan has a plan for your life!" What a challenge faced by every pastor. Jesus is calling some to give up their plans to be pastors and church planters. All of us have to give up our entire life to Jesus; it is the nature of being a Christian. But some must leave their plans and careers to become servants to the church. To be a lead pastor who invites men to this life is both wonderful and terrifying!

The challenges that were before Jeff were sobering. Do I really leave my life as an opera singer behind? Is it really Jesus calling me to this? What if I fail at it after giving everything up? Could I please get some guarantee that I won't crash and burn, before risking everything? But



with Jesus it usually doesn't work that way. Jump and I'll catch you...dive and I'll fill the pool...believe and I'll act when it's time. Jeff was amazingly brave. He had flown to New York City for a round of job interviews. But by the time he arrived, he was persuaded that Jesus did not want him to do any of the interviews. He was to give everything to Jesus and plant a church instead. So Jeff wandered the streets of the city praying and wondering at the apparent foolishness of the choice he was making to walk away from opera. He even preached Jesus in a homeless shelter (I told you that he was full of courage). When he returned to Carbondale he told me that he was going to do it! I was excited and proud of him.

But as with all of us, the evil one has a way of making truth look like foolishness and lies look like gold. Jeff changed his mind and decided to get an opera job in Chicago. I was heartbroken (but recently learned from Jeff that I did not express to him my certainty that he was making a critical mistake. I just said "okay" and let him go). But Jesus has a thing about getting His way! Jeff and  left for the weekend to get an apartment in Chicago and returned having landed a job and a house in Bloomington, Illinois (the city in which we suspected Jesus wanted him to plant a church). Jeff can tell you the details about how it all happened but, while I was persuaded that Jesus was about to call "checkmate," Jeff was not thinking of church planting (just about teaching voice lessons at the university). So they moved to Bloomington and we started affectionately calling him Jonah.

Around that time we had a conference at Vine which Jeff reluctantly agreed to attend (he says that he almost didn't). Tony Ranvestel was there too...another reluctant but doomed church planter with a plan of his own. During prayer at one of the sessions, they both found themselves wandering in the lobby to avoid the pressure that Jesus was exerting against their stubborn wills. After comparing notes, they each agreed that they would go up for prayer if the other would go with

him. And that was it! I remember watching from the front as they walked down there and praying for them as God's power came upon them. They surrendered the fight; Jesus got what he wanted and they both gave up all to follow Him. Tony comes back into the story later, but Jeff was about to begin a crash course in planting a church.

Jeff and [REDACTED] started with no team and no worship leader, although eventually a handful did join them from Vine. Little training and money were once again the prominent mistakes that I made in those early days (and they paid the price for it). But through many heartaches and troubles they persevered until Clear View became a growing and healthy church.

In 2002, Ben Powers was on deck as our next church planter. He was one of our pastors at Vine and we had been preparing him for a couple of years at that point. He and [REDACTED] were a vital part of the mission and it was hard to consider letting them move away. But I began to have a nagging sense that it was about time (though it was a couple of years sooner than I expected). When I approached Ben with the idea, he was nervous but willing. It was fun to see him practically thinking through where he might plant.

He was hoping for a big city...new territory for us, having only planted in university cities up to that point. And as we prayed, it became clear that St. Louis was the place. Several years earlier, before Ben had started on staff, Sándor and I had been praying together one morning when we were surprised by God's power. As we prayed, I suddenly had the name "University City" come to mind (a suburb just west of downtown St. Louis) and, with it, an overwhelming sense that Jesus was going to have us plant a church there someday. I wept with a love and longing for the people of the city that only Jesus can bring. And as quickly as the experience began, it ended. Sándor and I went on leading Vine, wondering what the future might hold.

Now it became clear that University City was the place. Ben and [REDACTED] were both excited

about it and now, by the third plant, we even had a plan for a team. This was progress in action. I would allow Ben to take a team of twelve people! I thought myself very generous. After all, we had planted Vine with a team of only six; he had 100 percent more! Again, no worship leader, little money, and a small team. But he had training, experience, and that Colgate smile! He was about to engage in the most challenging venture of his life and would demonstrate a strength of perseverance that is given only through the grace of God. And so, City Lights Church began.

Scott Joseph had already joined us on staff as a pastor and Aaron Kuhnert was about to—trusted, proven men who would be vital to Vine and eventually would plant other churches. We were amazed at the constant provision from Jesus for His church. He was raising up young men to take the place of those he was sending. Every time we would wonder, "How will we do this without them?" and every time he provided the next person to lead His people. The church grew and matured each time we sacrificed and gave our best to His purpose. "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).

## Finding More Help

In January of 2003 we knew that it was time to find a long-term worship leader for Vine. [redacted] had been leading worship from the beginning and had done an amazing job. The values of humility and intimacy would provide the foundation for worship in many churches. But from early on, [redacted] and I both knew that eventually someone else would take over the responsibility from him. So we started looking, and we looked everywhere. Because we don't normally do "outside" searches it felt difficult and uncomfortable (usually we raise up our leaders from among the members of the church). I did a phone interview with a worship leader in Arizona, received a pile of application emails from people all over the country, and even flew to England to meet a young man from a church there. But I'll never forget meeting Chris Miller for the first time!

Chris was an intern with a worship leader at a church in Ohio. I had been in Michigan to listen to a guy in Ann Arbor, so I drove down to hear Chris. When I walked into the offices of the church, there was a rough-looking punk, who felt like he was trying too hard to be edgy, sitting at a computer frantically trying to print something. Instantly I felt the Holy Spirit say, "That is your guy!" And, while I didn't mean to be argumentative, my reaction was "No way! That dude is a mess!" I hadn't heard him sing yet, but in my gut I could feel that he was raw, undisciplined, and hurting. Just what I didn't need was another problem; I wanted a cleaned up, polished, shining, needs-no-work, instant worship leader from a box that would work for nearly nothing! Then I heard him sing and thought he was pretty good, but still raw, undisciplined, and hurting. And his guitar playing was not so hot.

We went out for a late dinner to get acquainted after the worship was over. I liked him personally, but I could feel his deep needs for coaching and maturing. If a person like that is in the


church that you lead, you just work with them and see if they respond. If they do, great! This was hard because I was HIRING him to be the second most visible person in the church and holding him up as an example for the disciples that we were making. What if he doesn't respond well to coaching and training? To move 600 miles and then find out it's a bad fit is tough for everyone. So I left with a feeling of uneasiness and a nagging sense that God had really told me that it was him (again, this is why we raise up our leaders from within rather than "hire" them from outside).

After a short time of prayer and processing with the other overseers, we decided that we should talk with Chris more on the phone about the immaturity issues and see how he responds. So I asked him some hard questions about how he was doing personally and about his relationship with a woman he was dating. The transparency and honesty with which he spoke to me instantly persuaded me that he was willing to be led and that his heart was good. So we took it another step and brought him in to Vine to lead a night of worship. He was a show-off and was too concerned about his image. But I was persuaded that he had a good, honest heart and that I could lead him through any problems that might arise. We decided to risk it and bring him to Vine as our new worship leader.

I look back now and thank God for His mercy in giving me Chris Miller! What a godly man he has become. The quality of his heart has been proven over and over. I trust him as much as I've ever trusted any man; I never have to worry that he will hide something from me or become self promoting. The character that Jesus has developed in him allows him to lead worship without trying to be the center of attention. He loves Jesus and his worship leading flows out of that love.

During this same period of time, I was struggling with having the church building in my backyard. I couldn't get away from work. People would forget their key and stop by the house to borrow mine. I would still look out the window to "see how things were" every time I got up in the

middle of the night. I thought about leadership issues constantly. Finally, I felt permission to sell our first house. It sold quickly, but we couldn't find another that would work well so we found ourselves in an apartment. I was frustrated that God wouldn't give me a house. I prayed and waited and complained, but nothing changed. Then one day, while driving on Highway 13 across Crab Orchard Lake, I felt Jesus speak to me as I prayed: "Build a house, son!" I was shocked by the words because I didn't think of Him calling me son. My dad never called me that. It felt intimate and strong. When I asked Larry whether he thought it might be God, he laughed and told me I should do it! It was a kind of joyful laugh, like my Father was really that good. Larry always gave me courage to do things that I wouldn't normally do (and still does). Maybe it's because he's not afraid of anything. I started looking for land in the spring of 2002 and bought 1 ½ acres that was ready to build.

Just like that we purchased plans for our dream house and started hiring subcontractors. I really didn't know much about building a house but I read a book about being your own general contractor and had Larry to answer questions for me. We started the basement in late May that year and we moved in to the finished house before  had to start kindergarten in August. Ninety days to build it all. Every contractor said that there was no way to do it that fast, but I just told them we were going to try! I would bring out coolers full of Gatorade on hot days when many different contractors were working in the house to keep them from irritating each other and fighting. God gave us such favor.

The day we moved in, I was walking in the back yard admiring the finished product. I loved it! It was perfect. Every detail like we wanted. As I looked on my work I heard the Holy Spirit say, "You do know that I'm going to ask you for it, right?!!" And I answered honestly, "Of course!

Everything I have is yours.” But truthfully, I thought he probably meant in twenty years or so after our kids were grown—which made it easy to answer Him so willingly. Little did I know that he had other plans!

## Blindsided

In May of 2003, we were on vacation in Florida. I loved driving out of Carbondale and leaving behind all of the pressures and challenges that come with being a lead pastor. A condo on the beach was just the thing to help me relax. One afternoon while [REDACTED] and the girls were napping ([REDACTED] was four months pregnant with [REDACTED] our third daughter, at the time), I was sitting on the patio looking over the ocean when I had a strange experience. Suddenly my eye sight became crazy clear (and I have good eyes to start with). It was as if I could see across the ocean—farther than any human eye can see. Then I heard the Holy Spirit's whisper: "In three weeks you will get a call." Sometimes I hate it when He tells me something like that and doesn't explain! As quickly as the experience started, it was over. My eye sight was normal again and no matter how much I asked for insight into what had happened he gave me none. I counted out three weeks and it fell right in the middle of a conference that I would be attending. I've always tended to fear the worst; I thought that the "call" would be a phone call with bad news from someone. It was driving me crazy wondering who was going to call.


The conference came and many of our leaders were there. [REDACTED] spent a lot of time in the hotel because she was tired from the pregnancy. During worship at one of the sessions, I had a vision pop into my mind of a dream that I had years before. I should backtrack and tell you about the dream. It was probably during the fall of 1994 when I had the other dreams about planting Vine. In the dream, I was standing in the woods near a small aquarium (I know...it's strange). The aquarium was on a stand near a pool of clear water. I knew in the dream that the aquarium represented the little church that we had been a part of before planting Vine. All at once, the glass broke and the colorful fish flowed out into the pool of water.



Then I noticed that the pool was full of other colorful fish. The pool of water joined a river, and I started walking behind Jesus down the bank of the river. As we walked along, there were more and more bright, colorful fish filling the river. The farther we walked, the more fish there were. Then Jesus suddenly turned left and walked across the river. I went to follow Him and, as I was stepping into the water, a huge snapping turtle lifted its head from the water to bite me. I pulled back in fear. When I looked up I saw Jesus disappear over the high bank on the other side of the river. I woke up feeling shaken. The dream had haunted me for years. Would I keep following Jesus to the end? Did the dream mean that I was in danger of not continuing after Him because of fear? It was one of those dreams that I didn't write down, but it stuck in my mind vividly, and I would think of it from time to time.

Now as I stood worshiping at the conference, I saw the same dream replaying before my eyes, except it was in slow motion. I watched the vision with my eyes closed, seeing each part in detail. But when I got to the part of Jesus crossing the river and the snapping turtle, it skipped the entire part. Suddenly I was on the other side of the river walking up the bank where I had seen Jesus disappear. As I came to the top of the high bank and looked over, I saw the skyline of a city and the Seattle Space Needle! Then everything sped up, and I began to feel the Holy Spirit speaking to me. "Do it again! I want you to plant a church in the Seattle area. There are enough Asians there to plant churches in Asia." (I'm thinking, "I've never even been to Seattle...how can I plant there?"). "Up to fifty people will go with you!" (at that I laughed, thinking it not likely and that the most I had ever sent with a plant was twelve). My mind went faster and faster with images and words about the new church plant. I was scared (and argumentative). I thought about Chris Miller and Greg Darling, our newest additions on staff at Vine. How could I just leave after they had risked so much to join the mission there? Then I blurted out, "I can't do it! I just brought Greg on staff!" After all, Greg was a

long-time friend who had just moved his family from another state and risked everything to join us in serving Jesus. Remember the silencing look your dad would give if you got a bit too bold and spoke to him with disrespect? Well...I felt that "look" from Father. Then I thought I heard "I didn't bring Greg for you...I brought him for Sandor!" I was stunned into silence (and embarrassed by my presumption!). My head was swirling with the implications of what I was experiencing!

The truth is that I was tired. The eight years of planting Vine had worn me out. I was ready to settle in and take it easy, not to plant another church! I felt old and didn't think I could do it. His words to me were shocking and not the kind of "call" I expected when he had spoken to me in Florida! I went back to the hotel room and told  what I had felt and that there was no way we could do it. Her response was typical of her over the years. With fire in her eyes and a knife in her voice, she said, "We will if he tells us to!" That shut me up, and I secretly hoped my vision had been the result of bad food from the night before.

Just a side note. I've recently been wondering what kind of assurance a church planter needs to have to decide when it's time to plant and where to plant. It seems to me that both times that I've planted a church, God had to dramatically get my attention because I had no desire or intention to plant. Many of the young men that we're raising up are in process of preparing for years (a benefit that I did not have). When it comes time to decide on the time and place, there is no need for God to persuade them that it's time to do it. Their lead pastor is initiating the timing and they are ready, willing, excited, and have been anticipating the change (even if with some trembling). For me, I was already set on my future course and needed to be shaken so that I would reconsider. All of this to say, I do not believe that everyone must have such experiences to be assured of God's timing and location for a church plant.

I went back to Carbondale and the intensity of the feelings surrounding the experience were gone—everything was back to normal. The recurring thought was “Did that really happen?” We tried to “put it on the shelf” and let it go, but it was always rumbling in the back of my mind. One morning in August, I was sitting on the porch of our house praying and I asked Jesus: “Did you really tell me to move to Seattle and plant a new church?” Immediately I felt “Read Genesis 3.” So I flipped my Bible open and read. “Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden’?’” (Genesis 3:1). It hit me in the chest like a ton of bricks! All of the feelings flooded back and my unbelief about what Jesus had told me weighed on me heavily. There I was asking, “Did God really say...?” I knew the answer. Once again, as with the initial experience, I knew it was God. But there was so much at risk that I pushed it out of my mind again.


About a month later, sitting in my same prayer place on the porch, I was explaining to Jesus why I couldn’t plant another church: “I am too old and tired!” Again a text from Genesis popped into my head: “Read chapter 12.” Not knowing off hand at the time what chapter 12 contained, I turned there and started reading. “Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you’....So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran” (Genesis 12:1-2a; 4). Again, it was like a thunderbolt in my chest! Abram was seventy-five when he risked everything to obey God and I was only thirty-eight! The same feelings; the same right fear of God. I knew in my gut that it was my Lord. I knew that he was asking me to do the most risky thing I could think of in my life at that point. He was asking me to leave my comfortable responsibility at Vine, to leave my dearest friends

and family in the world, to leave our new house, to leave security and comfort and ease! This was all getting too real, and I was shaken now! How could I ever do such a thing?

Meanwhile, [REDACTED] was getting closer to the time of delivering our third little girl and, consistent with the later months of her previous pregnancies, she waddled like a duck carrying a bowling ball. One morning she was volunteering at [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]'s elementary school, she [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] (we were in need of something else to make life more exciting...nothing much to think about). [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED], she was not seriously injured. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] two months later when it WAS time to deliver the baby, [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] Morgan was born. She looked identical to her two older sisters and was a wonderful foreshadowing of the birth of a new church that Jesus was stirring in our hearts (I was hoping that this church plant, if we actually did it, would not be like delivering a baby [REDACTED]!).

In November, we had our fall retreat. I had only told Larry and Sándor about my suspicions. Saying a definitive "yes" to Jesus on moving and doing it all over again was very hard! During an evening session's prayer, I went up to pray for Flynn Sam (who was weeping with God's power on him). But every time I laid my hand on him, I would start sobbing. So finally someone started praying for me. I was immediately shaken to the core by what I saw next. It was a vision of Jesus. Not Jesus the Lamb of God, gentle and kind. Not Jesus, the Son of Man, with all of the limitations of


humanity. It was the Mighty One, like in the book of Revelation! He was huge with fire in His eyes and a sword coming out of His mouth. He stood towering over me in great might and power! But He was weeping and I heard Him saying to me: "Steve, there are not enough churches!" There was my Lord, the One who died for me and saved me from hell, weeping over the lack of churches. And I was resisting His orders to plant a new church because I thought it would be too hard...too costly. The experience forced me to look honestly at my sinful heart. I sobbed in repentance and sorrow for my shallow love. That night I told Him "yes;" I would move and plant a new church. Within the week, we had flights booked to make our first visit to Seattle.

Part of me was still hoping that Jesus would somehow show us that He didn't really want us to go; maybe He was just testing our willingness. But mostly, I knew deep in my gut that He was sending us to a new and difficult place. I remember looking out of the window of the hotel in Seattle suburb of Bellevue thinking, "What are you doing to me?" It felt like a kind of "mayday" cry for help. "It's a city, and I'm from the country." It was busy and intense, and we couldn't even find any church building as we would drive around looking (in a city where ninety-some percent of the people don't go to church on any given Sunday, you don't need many churches). When we drove through the downtown areas, I held my breath, hoping that he didn't want us to live and plant there. It wasn't until  saw a vision of a huge bulls-eye over the 405/520 interchange that we felt confident that he was placing us on the eastside of Seattle. Much better than being in the super-condensed Westside; the eastside was only really-condensed. I had hope that I might survive it.

That is until we started looking at houses! Wow!! The prices terrified me. In 2004, Seattle was right in the midst of the crazy, twenty percent annual increases in property values (We thought prices were bad then, but when we came back in six months they were even higher). None of it

seemed possible. How could we ever afford to live there? We were leaving our new house on an acre and a half for an old house that was twice as expensive on a postage-stamp lot. Oh yes, I remember! I follow Jesus. He calls the shots. I do whatever he says. When he says "jump," I say "how high?" It was hard to keep it all straight in my heart as we faced the practical issues of what he was asking us to do. But everything kept pointing to the reality of what he was indeed telling us.

We spent the last part of the week on the Olympic Peninsula, watching the Seattle skyline across the water. It was exciting and terrifying all at once. The city stood there like a threatening storm, just daring me to try and plant a church there. Every dream that we had, every nudge during prayer, every circumstance continued to confirm what we were to do. While we were staying there, I called Larry and Sándor and told them that I had to do it! I would announce the decision at the team meeting that would take place right after we returned. How would I tell people? They were our family; the church was like our own dear child. The board had prepared for the worst case scenario of Vine's attendance possibly dropping forty percent. We really didn't know what would happen; we had no experience with this kind of change. But even if the church dropped from 650 to 400, what could we do? We were sure that it was Jesus. I either had to do what He said, moving to plant a new church, or I had to knowingly disobey Jesus. No matter what the outcome, I had to do it!

Again, returning to Carbondale made it hard to believe we were really supposed to leave. It felt so familiar and so wonderfully comfortable. I had lived there fourteen years and  twelve. We were leaving our home and our family. I stood in front of the team meeting, knowing that once the words were out of my mouth there was no turning back. It really was like jumping off a cliff; once you're falling, there is no sense in wishing that you had stayed on top. You just prepare to land! The only way that I knew to tell them was to tell the stories of how Jesus had spoken to me and to

remind them of how many times I told them over the years that they must obey Him. How could I do any less? I cried most of the way through telling the church what I was doing (it was probably more like sobbing). The meeting felt raw and intimately personal. Everybody in the room was in tears. But the response of the disciples was staggering.

Not one person complained or left or doubted. They really believed that it was Jesus and that there was nothing else to do but follow Him. At the end of the evening, people started coming up and telling me they thought maybe Jesus wanted them to go with us. People were sad and excited and willing all at the same time. I thought, “These people really follow Jesus—maybe we have made a few disciples here!” It was an exciting and dreadful time.

The hardest thing for me was losing people. It was very hard to think that those whom I had loved so much that would be staying in Carbondale, would begin shifting their affections to Sándor. They had really loved me through the years. Giving THEM to another was very difficult. And it wasn't that I didn't trust Sándor with them; I trusted him completely. He had led through the years in every area of the church and he knew it as well as I did in nearly every way. It was more sinful than that. There was some combination of pride in my success and loving the attention that a lead pastor of a larger church receives. Whatever it all was, Jesus was about to heal me of it (He's a good teacher—His methods really work! They hurt, but they work!). I laid in bed that night, exhausted, thinking “what will come of all of this” and I understood better than ever C. S. Lewis's famous line in the “Chronicles of Narnia”: “He's not a tame Lion.” My Lord had proven more wonderful and terrifying than I had ever known before.

## Getting Ready

Preparation was a blur! Sándor was teaching more, and I was teaching less. People started saying goodbye' right away. The team for the new church was coming together. But what a process! Who was prepared for such a task? Moving 2,500 miles away to a city where so few honored Jesus. Who would make it for the long haul? Who was Jesus really sending? Which ones should go and which ones should stay? When the Holy Spirit first spoke to me that “up to 50 people” would go with us, there were about twenty names that came to my mind. Nearly all of them were coming to me, telling me that they felt like they were supposed to go (and a lot of amazing people that I never dreamed would do it). All except the ones that I most desperately wanted to go—Larry and [REDACTED] Anderson! I didn't know if I could do it without them.

Larry and [REDACTED] had become parents to [REDACTED] and me. They were grandparents to our daughters. We ate dinner together nearly every Wednesday evening. Larry was my sounding board; I bounced every idea for church leadership and for my family off him. He has probably listened to me talk and process for more than 10,000 hours (poor Larry!). They prayed for us constantly. We trusted them with everything. When [REDACTED] had spoken to me years earlier that “God sets the lonely in families” (Psalm 68:6 NIV), he had really done it for me. I didn't know if I could plant a church without them and, even if I could, I didn't want to! They were willing, but Jesus didn't ask them to do it. I tried everything I knew to get them to go with us. But it wasn't God and I was heartbroken. Talk about painful—this was hard on me! But I had to accept it.

By February, the team consisted of forty-eight adults and children. What a group! A doctor, a professor, lawyers, university students, young professionals—it was amazing. During the first team meeting, I spent most of the time threatening them about what it would take and how important it was



that they finished the race Jesus was placing before us! I regularly prayed that if any were not supposed to go, that He would reveal it now. During the second meeting, the Holy Spirit fell on all of us with such power that we were overcome. A bunch of the team members were saved that night (not a bad idea if you're going into the spiritual battle of a church plant). Going on a church plant is the kind of life-shaking risk that makes a person tremble and cuts through any superficial lip service that you've given Jesus. If it doesn't shake you up like that, you don't understand what you're doing. That night we trembled at the feet of our Lord and worshiped Him in tears and awe.

A group of young men from the team made a preparation trip to Seattle with me during their spring break from SIU. For all of them it was their first visit to the city to which they were moving. We were all excited to explore and hoping that Jesus would speak to us about the new church. I was struggling with what to name it. Because the "old man" awoke early every morning and the young punks were still sleeping, I would walk down to the Starbucks on 140<sup>th</sup> and Bel-Red in Bellevue. One morning I was sitting outside Starbucks drinking my Americano. It was cloudy with drizzle (a weather condition with which I would become very familiar), and I sat by myself praying. My prayers that day were in the form of question asking (What are you doing to me? Am I really moving here? Are you sure you didn't get the wrong Steve? ). It is a kind of faithless, frustrating prayer that I practice more than I ought. Knowing that it really was Him and, yes, He was doing this to me and, yes, He had the right Steve, I asked Him, "What do I name the church?" As I sat mulling the question, there was a break in the clouds right in front of me (over the Applebee's...but I don't believe a divine promotion of the restaurant was intended). Then I heard, in my mind, the words: "When I awoke from my long, dark slumber, all I could see was Blue Sky." I knew that "Blue Sky" was the name of the church. The feeling was like resurrection. After all seemed hopeless and dark, a break in the clouds. God is still there, even when he feels far away. Like a day when it's raining

and you get on an airplane with water streaming down the windows on takeoff. But then you break through the clouds and the sun is shining! The sky is shockingly blue and your heart leaps—"It's still there!" I think it will be like that when we go to be with Him. All of the dark, shadowy feelings of this life and our bodies will be shaken off for a kind of sunshine and blue sky like we've never before seen. In a dark, rainy, unbelieving city, Jesus would name His church Blue Sky Church. It's just like Him. I walked back to my friends with my mind alive with the vision of a new church that Jesus would plant.

## Ready to Move

It all went so fast. Several more team meetings, a couple of retreats, and I was moving out of my office. It was April. Our house was up for sale. Nothing felt safe. Everything was exciting. Chris Miller was coming with us as the worship leader, even though he had just been on staff for one year at Vine. Michael Petrick would be taking over leading worship at Vine. But I needed a “Sándor,” too. Sándor had been running the details of Vine for years, and I really wasn’t sure that I could go back to taking care of all of that without him. Then I felt the Holy Spirit’s nudge that it was Ernest Menocal. I was shocked. Ern had been saved six or eight months earlier, and I didn’t know him very well. Just graduating from SIU, he was Mr. GQ himself with haircuts that looked strange to my old eyes. I distinctly remembered my profound prayer in response to the Holy Spirit: “REALLY?” To see if I had heard correctly, I took Ern with me on a trip to visit Clear View Church. When we walked into the High School auditorium where they met, I quickly made a mental list of things that needed to be improved in their set up. I turned to Ern and asked, “Okay, what do you notice?” He went down my list of ten things and added a couple more that I had missed! I was impressed and thought, “Maybe he is the guy.”

After talking with Larry and Sándor about it all, I was persuaded that I was to bring Ern on staff as my “pastoral assistant” for the new church. It was great fun seeing his east coast, surfer punk face turn green when I asked if he would do it! We were sitting on the side porch of my house (that would soon belong to someone else). When I asked what his parents would say, he stuttered and mumbled something about them not being Christians and this probably being hard for them to understand (I love the experience of inviting a young man to give up all of his plans and follow Jesus by serving His church. It’s fun to watch them quickly add up the sum total of what it is going to cost.

I probably just like company in my suffering!). I look back now and think, “What would I do without Ern!” I think Jesus knows that I am a weak man so he gives me strong men around me who make up for my weaknesses.

May came and we found ourselves packing and selling or giving away stuff that wouldn't fit in the truck. The things we kept, we packed into one large U-haul truck. Our new house was empty, and we tried not to think about everything we had put into building it. It now belonged to someone else. All we asked was that Jesus would save the new owners (and he did—they started going to Vine and were made new by Jesus, but that is their story not mine). James Chidester was going to drive the truck out for us (he says he beat us to Seattle even though he left two days later, but you can't believe everything he says...); David and [REDACTED] Chery were driving our Camry. So we put [REDACTED] and baby [REDACTED] in the back of the Isuzu Rodeo, threw in a couple of suitcases, and started driving to Seattle.

[REDACTED] cried but didn't look back. She said it was like losing a child. We had given all of ourselves for nine years to raise that child—cried over her, laid awake worrying about her, experienced great joy in her love. The years were gone and it felt cold to drive away—like we didn't really care after all. At that point, I tried to pretend that it wasn't a big deal to give her up. [REDACTED] determined not to look back because it hurt too much; she didn't want to feel it anymore. One of the girls asked what we would do without “Grammy and Poppy” (that's Larry and [REDACTED]). I just told them I didn't know and that Jesus would take care of us. We were all quiet as we drove out of Carbondale.

One thing about driving from Carbondale to Seattle—IT'S A LONG DRIVE! Four days, three nights, 2,500 miles, too much fast food and James did beat me with the moving truck even

though I had a two-day head start! It was surreal. A foreign land. I remember driving over the Cascade Mountains down into Western Washington. It was foggy and raining a thick mist that made the moss-covered evergreen forests look like a scene out of “Lord of the Rings.” We came down out of the mountains (and it was still raining) to our new home?? It was more like a hotel. The plan was to buy a house quickly and stay in the hotel for a couple of weeks until we could move in (if you know me well, you know that I think anything can be done FAST). When the first two overpriced houses were snatched from us by someone offering 50 or 60 G’s over asking price, we figured out that this might be a little tricky! Within a week, we found ourselves living in a month to month three bedroom apartment. Wow, it was a shock! It was like going back to living single, except with a wife and three kids—nothing like the house we had left in Illinois. So this was church planting at forty years old! We were in for an adventure!

The rest of the team began to trickle in, all with the excitement and trembling of moving to a new, far-away place. It felt like we wanted to live close together for safety, like a bunch of young chickens huddled under the light in the corner of a cardboard box. But it wasn’t possible; we now lived in a large city. That was our first education! In Carbondale, everything and everybody was ten minutes away. You could quickly and easily get to friends, spontaneously go to dinner, or have them pray for you. Now it was thirty minutes, sometimes up to an hour with traffic, to get anywhere. We were all late for everything. We would leave ten minutes before we were to arrive, just like we always had, and then realize that we were still just leaving when we were supposed to be arriving. It was hard to adjust our ways. Making extra time in our lives for traffic was right up there with learning the northwest lingo. I remember trying to correctly use “no worries” in a sentence (instead of “not a problem”), without embarrassing myself. I would practice it in the mirror when I shaved, but inevitably my old Midwest response would leap out when I actually had an opportunity to use it.

I'm glad that there are no recordings of me trying to correctly order a cup of coffee. You had to know the secret, Seattle code. "Is it venti Americano with room" or "With room venti Americano?" And, by the way, what is a venti and grande anyway? How are they different from our Midwest large and medium? And why is the tall the shortest cup in the place? Man...the important things you have to learn on a church plant. I felt too old for all of this.


That summer the adjustment continued. Moving from a large church to just beginning again was shocking. All of the things that we had easy at Vine, with land and a building, experienced staff, and safety in numbers, had disappeared. We met for our Sunday team meetings in our little apartment. Over fifty people jammed in that small living and dining room was an experience. Thankfully, there was no one in the apartment below us (and it stayed that way through the summer). It was like having a herd of cattle on the third floor. The pile of shoes outside our door was three-feet high and took up most of the landing (no joke!). One Sunday our neighbor, who traveled for work most weekends, was home. The look on her face when she saw the pile of shoes was priceless! If she had known that we were not really just obsessive shoe collectors but that there were feet to fit in all of those shoes in our apartment, I'm sure she would have complained to the management. As it was, she just hurried to shut her door, without talking to me, like she might catch my obsessive shoe collecting disorder.

We worshiped, we prayed, I taught our team from the Bible on coping with all of the challenges that we faced in planting a new church. And we did it all as quietly as we could with fifty people, so that we didn't lose our meeting space due to complaints. The Holy Spirit would meet us and encourage us again each week. It was like finding yourself on the front lines in a war and having just enough courage to keep going and not fall apart. Then we would gather again for our

team meeting and remember why we were planting another church. At least that is what it was like for me. There may have been others that just had an amazingly fun time and adjusted easily (although by the look in people's eyes each Sunday, I expect most of them were stretched). But I felt the pressure!

What if it didn't happen? Where would we meet? Would I be able to find a house for my family in this crazy, overpriced city? Would our team members make it? Which of our young people were vulnerable to the evil one's temptation and might fall under the pressure to conform to the Seattle culture? It was so different than planting Vine with six people where I really did know how everyone was doing most of the time. Here I was flying blind, having to rely on my instruments. The small group leaders had to know what was going on with the people that they led. But some of them were struggling: Getting tattoos, smoking clove cigarettes, and discovering how much you could drink at the clubs without offending the biblical mandate to "not get drunk." It was a lot of pressure. We were all trying to fit in to this new place and, compared to Carbondale, we were living in a continual spiritual fight. I bet some of the team members could tell some good stories about the look on my face when I confronted them with concerns over their questionable behavior as a Christian team member on a church plant! I'll resist telling them here, to help them save face (and I'm sure they will thank me profusely). But in spite of all this, we were all still overconfident.

We thought we would just come into this city, start a church service that was quality with good worship music, clear Bible teaching, and the presence of the Living God, and people would automatically come. We were in for a shocking disappointment. Ninety-some percent of the people didn't go to church on any given weekend (and after six years we have not changed this statistic). But we did plant a healthy church.

 was the first salvation. He was a co-worker of James Chidester. I remember standing next to Chris Miller, when he still had hair, as he led us in worship by Lake Sammamish (hair loss...one of the minor costs of church planting!). We were baptizing the first measurable reason for us to go through so much change and sacrifice! A real human being who didn't know Jesus before we moved who was now going down into the water with Christ, being buried into His death and rising with Him in life (and he still radically follows Jesus these years later)! We were excited. He was the first of hundreds who would do the same. We just didn't know how long it would take.

I would talk with Sándor on the phone frequently and it always felt like we were on different planets (and we were). I used lots of words like hard, tired, frustrated, and too old. His words were more like great, easy, tons of growth, and New Kahala (the best Chinese fast food in Carbondale). Remember all of the possible outcomes for which we had prepared with me leaving Vine as lead pastor? NONE OF THEM HAPPENED! The church grew and grew. It was 650 or 700 when I left. We took fifty people with us and a ton of leaders. But God's grace was on them. They continued to add new people to the point where they were bursting at the seams and in need of a new facility. Sándor proved to be the man called to lead that church and has faithfully led them to a church approaching 2,000 people. Oh yes....back to my words: hard, tired, frustrated, and too old!

We rented the Meydenbaur Center for our Sunday services starting the first weekend in October 2004. It was the best place we could find (and the price tag proved it). Though parking was in a garage underground and the elevator ride to the top floor was not ideal, everyone knew where it was in downtown Bellevue, and it had a great, city feel. We had rented temporary offices where we stored the sound system and our mobile kids program. As many have experienced in planting a





church, each Sunday the worship team got the pleasure of hauling the equipment at an hour too early to be awake. But they were amazing. No complaints; no problems that they couldn't fix. I would show up to welcome people and teach (this was much better than my frantic, sticking my nose in every little detail of preparation as I did while planting Vine). And the people came. Within a few months we were over one hundred people (we were relieved when some of them moved on to find another church plant that would do things just the way they wanted). It was fun and exciting. We loved each other so much and it felt as if Blue Sky would continue to grow to 1,000 within the year!

There were real challenges and we quickly found that this was going to be harder than we thought. But we pressed on and Jesus continued to bring new people, a few who were not yet Christians did actually surrender to Jesus in small group or with a friend. And Blue Sky slowly grew.

## **It's Hard to Do it Again!**

During that first fall, I was still frantically looking for a house to buy for my family. Every time we bid on one, someone would buy it. The forty-eight thousand dollars of profit from our house in Illinois was sitting in the bank waiting to be a very small down payment on a very expensive old house in the Seattle area. Then one morning as I was driving in to Blue Sky's temporary offices, I felt the clear, ringing sense that the Holy Spirit was speaking to me. "Give your entire down payment to Blue Sky and hire a children's director!" I'll never get use to the shock of God's thinking versus mine. You may be better than I am, but my thoughts always look terribly selfish and low compared to His. But I knew the feeling of contrast well and I was pretty sure it was Him speaking to me. Wow! It felt hard. I had been struggling and frustrated for months trying to buy a house. I felt responsible to get my wife settled in a home and my children in a school. Reasonable enough, right? Now, after five months of pain, Jesus asks for my down payment. I worked with my mind distracted all day and returned home in an introspective mood.

 always notices when I'm bothered by something, so she kept looking at me with her "come on...out with it" look. I ignored her and went for a walk right after dinner to get time alone to pray and think. I knew her well enough to know that if I told her what I had heard, she would be all about it. There was no way I was telling her yet. When we first sold the house, she wondered if we should give the money to Blue Sky and, after about three seconds of pondering it, I told her, "No. God does not want us to do it." Again, it's reasonable right? You give up your new house, comfortable job, and all your friends to move across the country and plant a church. It's just reasonable that God would at least let you keep your down payment for a new house! Are you with me? He wasn't.

I went for my walk and prayed. Over and over an old worship song that I loved when I was in my first church home was repeating in my mind. I began to sing it: "Draw me close to you. Never let me go. I lay it all down again, to hear you say that I'm your friend. You are my desire. No one else will do. 'Cause nothing else can take your place, to feel the warmth of your embrace. Help me find the way. Bring me back to you." Then I started weeping as I sang the familiar chorus: "You're all I want. You're all I've ever needed. You're all I want. Help me know you are here." I walked and cried for an hour or two, again surrendering everything to Jesus. All I wanted was Him; I wanted everything that I am and own to be at His disposal. That night I told Him that he could have the \$48,000 and that I would hire a children's director. I told Him that I would live in an apartment for the rest of my life if that is what he wanted. I worshiped Him for His kindness and mercy to me and my family. And when I returned to our apartment,  still waiting for me to spill my guts, I told her the story. She smiled and responded with her usual, "Let's do it!!" So we gave the money and gave up searching for a house.





The next day I started looking for a more permanent apartment and it hurt! Small, expensive, dumpy, or unavailable was the conclusion at every place we considered. I was willing, but not liking how things looked. Then I had a strange thought: "I wonder if they will loan us the money to buy a house with nothing down?" It was a crazy thought. The houses were way overpriced. We had no assets as collateral or any kind of assurance for the bank. But I inquired anyway. When I asked the loan officer, she hardly seemed to notice and didn't bother asking why I no longer had the down payment. After crunching a few numbers, she politely said, "Sure. I think we can do it!" While I'm really sorry for all of the bad loans the banks made during those years and the financial crisis it created, I'm forever thankful that they were so careless in loaning us money for a house that we couldn't afford! So the search for a house began anew.

Our realtor had to be sick of us and all of our confusing stories about what we were doing moving to Seattle anyway. But she was willing to look more, even after five frustrating months. There was a house that we had looked at earlier that was back on the market. We had bid on it, but someone had outbid us. Now they had lowered the price to be more within the range of what the bank would loan us. It wasn't great, but it was a house. Built in the seventies and decorated as such, badly kept up, stinking of dog urine and other things that we didn't care to know about, and on a lot measured in square feet not acres. It needed to be completely remodeled before we could move in. And only pushing half a million dollars! What a deal! So we bought it. The day we closed and walked through, Shu-hui cried and I nearly vomited. What had we done?!! We bought a dump for more money than we could imagine. "God, what are you doing to us?"

And so it began...the remodel, that is. We lived in an apartment in Issaquah, and I spent all my waking hours (and many when I was supposed to be sleeping) either working on the church plant or working on the house. We were mostly out of money, so I had to do the remodel myself (and I'm not terribly handy). Everything needed doing: flooring, ceilings, cabinets, doors, trim, paint, sinks, toilets...is there anything else? I would call Larry and ask him how to do it, then I would dive in and do my best. Putting down hardwood floors took the better of sixty hours on my knees. I would crawl into my car at midnight or after and make the half hour drive to our apartment. By that time my legs would have cramped up so badly that I couldn't straighten them. Falling out of the vehicle and unable to straighten up, I dragged myself up the three flights of stairs to our place. I know the neighbors must have thought that I was drinking.

But friends helped! So many that I can't remember all. Chris scraped the ceilings. Ern,

 and  helped lay the hardwood.  painted the cabinets. Another Chris tore off

wallpaper. Ern did plumbing.  painted doors and miles of trim.  tore out carpet.   
tore out walls (and replaced them).  replaced every outlet. Countless people, armed with paintbrushes and rollers, painted every inch of wall in the house. It was unbelievable. It took six weeks and an army but, in the end, we got it all done and moved in. I was exhausted.

When people think about starting new churches, they frequently don't think about the pressures of such daily life issues. The stress and pressure were overwhelming and I was constantly overstimulated. I lost sixty pounds (which was a good thing). But my emotions were shot; I felt spent and was not sure that I could keep going. One critical night, I asked a number of the leaders to pray for me. It was one of the most profound experiences of my life. Most of the time I simply cried as they prayed; tons of built-up emotion came pouring out of me. I'm sure they were thinking, "And we followed this basket case clear across the country?" But it was the culmination of my "put your head down and press on" approach to life. The changes were hard, I hated any kind of suffering, I was straining to make the church work, and I didn't have Larry to listen to me process.

As they prayed, I saw a picture in my mind that I didn't understand. I knew that it was wood, but I couldn't see it clearly. Then suddenly I saw it! I was looking down a beam of wood with my cheek pressed into it. My eye looked right down the length of the beam to Jesus with His cheek pressed into the beam looking back at me. I could see His arms outstretched, nailed to the very wood that I was touching, thorns pressed into His head. And I understood. "That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:10-11). Again, I wept and wept in surrender to my Lord. He gave everything to save me; why did I so despise the cost of suffering to plant a new church? It was really minor suffering compared to His—like a scratch not

worthy of a band-aid compared to open heart surgery. That he would even count it in any category close to what he went through for me was grace in itself. My life wasn't in danger, I hadn't been flogged, or hated, or condemned. Whatever loneliness and stress that I was experiencing, Jesus counted as sharing with Him in His suffering. It was not right that it should be so; I didn't deserve such fellowship. But what mercy was given to me; he would allow me to participate with Him on His mission. Again, my purpose was clear: Keep going even if it was hard or seemed impossible. Jesus was with me.

During all of the house search and remodel, we were also looking for a facility to lease for Blue Sky. Our personal realtor had recommended a commercial realtor by the name of Chuck Reidt. While I had spoken with him on the phone a number of months earlier, we were now looking for a facility in earnest. We needed space and the church was yet too small and new to have the finances to purchase a building, so we needed a place to lease. The problem was finding a building with enough parking that needed minimal renovation. There were several possible buildings but, for one reason or another, they always fell through. Usually it was an issue of obtaining occupancy from the city for a church (no sprinkler system, not enough parking, etc.). In hindsight, I see the mercy of God in protecting us from the wrong places. I also experienced this when planting Vine. Buildings that at the time seemed like an improvement, within a short time were too small or in the wrong location for long term. So we ended up back at the very first building we had looked at but did not pursue because of a lack of parking.

It was right next door to our temporary offices. And by the grace of God, our relationship with our office property managers allowed us to get a contract for "Sunday only" parking right next

door, which the city accepted as adequate parking for public assembly. God worked out all of the details, and we agreed with the owners on a five year lease of 16,000 square feet. But it was a mess!

The building had been abandoned for four years. A biotech fish lab had occupied it before going bankrupt and had left it in shambles. The large warehouse in the back needed to be divided for kid's space and the auditorium. The owner installed sprinkler systems (and it was miraculous that he agreed to do so). With Ern coordinating the effort, we hired contractors and did the general work ourselves. And, as with all building projects, it was painful. Especially for Ern who worked such long hours that I don't believe he slept much during those weeks. One evening late, he cut his thumb badly and, rather than taking the time to go to the hospital, stitched it up himself with a needle and thread!! Now that's devotion! But after tons of hard work and many tense meetings with city inspectors, we were approved for occupancy and had our first service there in June of 2005.


I should mention the money for the lease and facility. It always shocks me how disciples respond in giving and sacrifice in church planting. First, in order to get the lease, numbers of our leaders had to sign personal guarantees for the sum of the five year lease. Now that's confidence that Jesus is going to plant His church! Three men signed in addition to me: Andrew Lumpe, [REDACTED], and [REDACTED] (I laugh that the owner even accepted my "guarantee" because I had so little to cover and had to promise a smallish retirement fund as "evidence that I could pay"). What faith filled men! I felt nervous for them and responsible to make the church work. As a lead pastor, it always feels intense asking people to make such radical commitments and call them to such vision. In the back of my mind I always, and did then, feel a bit of "what if I'm wrong about this?" In addition, we estimated that we needed \$120,000 for renovations.

Because I don't believe in fund raising, the process was simple. Plan as best we can for how much it will cost, show the church the facility, and have an offering to cover the amount. Everyone gave to it—students and professionals—and they gave with excitement and joy. The church responded to the need for a place to operate as Jesus' church. I'm always amazed and humbled by the number of people that genuinely sacrifice and go without to give. I knew people who emptied their savings accounts for this offering. Everyone listened to the Holy Spirit's nudges and everyone participated together and every need was met. God is good.




When we moved into the building, I expected quick growth but it never came. At Vine we doubled in size during the first year after building the facility. At Blue Sky, growth was slow. We did continue to grow at a steady, plodding pace. It was like being a kid who constantly was asking dad "are we there yet?" I was half crazy with impatience, searching for reasons for the slow growth. We improved the services and placed our ads better. We taught the church on inviting and being outward focused. We did assessments of church health and leader effectiveness. We prayed and prayed and prayed (I probably spent most of my time begging). And still the church grew slowly. I began the process of accepting that we were in a hard city where many people were not interested in Jesus or His church and that it was going to be slow, hard work. But slow or fast, he continued to build and gave us wonderful surprises along the way.


One of these "surprises" caused me to tremble when I was at a lead pastor meeting at Clear View Church in November of 2005. We were worshiping and praying, like we always do. What a wonderful experience praying with a group of men who are in unity and devoted together in Jesus' mission. I had my face lifted to God and was enjoying His presence. Suddenly, a very simple picture popped into my mind. There were colored lights, four in a row, which came on one at a time. Pink,



pink, pink...BLUE! When I saw the blue light I opened my eyes in shock! Somehow I knew as the pink lights lit up one at a time that they represented my three daughters. And when I saw that the fourth light was blue, I was shaken! A boy?  and I were definitely NOT planning to have any more children. Our lives were busy enough and, with the church plant, we felt overwhelmed much of the time. I left the session and called my dear wife: "Hey babe. How are you doing? You feel okay?" My thoughts were simply, "I sure hope she's not pregnant!" She responded "I'm fine! Why are you asking?" I evaded her inquiry.

When I returned to Seattle from the trip, one thing was sure: I STAYED AWAY FROM HER! There was no intimate welcome home! I was steering clear of a possible fourth pregnancy. "Hands off" was my motto. "Don't play with fire!" Then about two weeks after my return, I was in the kitchen with the kids, and Shu-hui was upstairs in our bedroom, when I heard the infamous scream: "STEVE, GET UP HERE!!" I ran upstairs to find her in the bathroom, holding a pregnancy test, crying and laughing (not yet for joy, but sharing my terror): "I'm pregnant!" I thought, "It can't be!" But she was pregnant and we began the process of adjusting to the idea of being a family too big to fit in any of our cars.

When the ultrasound exposed "the goods" and we were told that we had a little boy on the way, both of us were amazed! God had forewarned us...encouraged us...given us a heads up. What a gift! I hadn't longed to have a boy; my three girls were wonderful. But it satisfied something deep within me. We had already picked boy names three times and had not needed them, so it was easy:   Morgan.  My Blue. At the delivery he squirted out on the table before the doctor came into the room, and he's been going fast ever since. God was so kind to us, and we were

thankful (even while facing sleepy nights and dirty diapers again). Maybe  was a kind of foreshadowing of the challenges and mercy that we were about to experience with the churches.

## **A Shocking Turn of Events**

Some things in our lives are not supposed to change. I am a creature of habit and love what is familiar and comfortable to me. One of my greater sins may be the love of comfort in this life. I had been a part of the Association of Vineyard Churches since that first little church home, and we planted Vine and Blue Sky as Vineyard churches. John Wimber had impacted my life profoundly, and he was my leader. I never met him, but I felt as though I knew him. He made sense to me. He was Jesus-centered, clear, simple, true to the Bible, tough when needed, and full of mercy and compassion. I loved him for starting the Vineyard and knew that my participation as part of the Vineyard family would never change. Yes, there were problems and churches that were like distant relatives that you're not sure you want to claim. But it was my family. I loved my leaders and had many friends whom I trusted.

I'm not going to go into all of the details of leadership and theological shifts that occurred in the years following John's death, for fear of misrepresenting or hurting those whom I still consider friends. I may write about it in another place at another time. But suffice it to say that the changes were difficult for me and, while I struggled through the Bible to resolve the issues, it became clear that the Vineyard was headed in a new direction. I ached because I knew that if I didn't change my theology to go with them, I would eventually no longer be welcome or at home. After reading and studying, it became clear that I would have to do damage to the clear message of the Bible to make such a shift. For five years I waited and prayed that it would be resolved or that I could simply ignore it. During these years it became harder and harder to take leaders to conferences because they would return confused and struggling over the new theology that was emerging.

Then in 2006 something happened. I had gone into Chris Miller's office and asked him to pray for me. There was nothing particularly wrong; I just felt like I wanted him to pray for me. During that time, the Holy Spirit fell on me with a power that I had not experienced in years. I fell to the floor and, while Chris continued to pray good things, it was what I felt inside that had my attention. It felt as if Jesus was telling me to leave the Vineyard and lead a new group of churches who would develop a simple, replicable model for planting new churches. I felt like he said to raise up young "home grown" church planters who would live and breathe clear, Biblical theology and our values of doing local church. He had my attention and I was scared! I didn't tell Chris that day what I had felt inside. Could it really be God? I had no desire to start something on my own and no longing to be anything more than the pastor of a local church. I certainly didn't need more pressure in my life! Then there were the practical issues: How could I do this and honor my friends and leaders in the Vineyard? How could they possibly understand? I knew that following Jesus in this would mean losing dear friends. How could I know for sure that it was right?

But confirmation came from many places. People who didn't know about what had happened spoke similar things to me when praying for me. Scott Bobsin and Ben Powers prayed for me at a retreat and said nearly all of the things spoken to me by the Holy Spirit in Chris' office word for word. My wife, who does not like change, believed that it was God. All of our overseers struggled through the implications together and came to the conclusion that it was right. But it was too hard. I felt like I couldn't go forward, and I couldn't go back; I was stuck! Like other times in my life, I had to either knowingly disobey God or do what he was asking come what may. So the decision was made. Pay back all of the money the Vineyard had given to support planting Blue Sky Church and go off on our own. Sándor at Vine and all of the other churches planted from Vine came with us. Six

churches. While there was a sense of relief to be out of the tension of the previous few years in the Vineyard, the silence from old friends and the uncertainty of the future hurt and scared me.

Two other events happened within a year of our leaving, which made it even more difficult. Tony Ranvestel was one of our leaders at Vine church and was a dear friend. Years earlier, he knew that he was called to plant a church and we were preparing him to do so. He fell in love with his wonderful wife, [REDACTED] and moved to another city to be married. So he was going to another Vineyard church and they brought him on staff there to continue to prepare for church planting. About the same time we were leaving the Vineyard, he was beginning to plant a new church in West Lafayette, Indiana at Purdue University. What a confusing time for him! He loved us and trusted us, still considering Vine in Carbondale to be his home. But he had developed friends and loyalties at his new church before planting. What could he do? He ignored the issue as I had and hoped it would go away.

I walked a thin line when he would call me for counsel on how to plant the church. He was caught between two sets of values, and he had to decide which way he would go. While I had felt like he would end up with us, I made no effort to persuade him. It was too hard. Why would I ask a friend to jump off the same cliff from which we had fallen? It wasn't an easy road that we faced.

In May of 2007, I was going to be in the Midwest visiting one of our churches. Tony and I agreed to meet up. I had told him that I couldn't continue to coach him on planting because I would just cause him more conflict of values and trouble with his leaders in the Vineyard. His plan when we met was to tell me that he couldn't go with us. Jeff Miller and I met with him at my hotel. It was one of those strange God moments where events are swirling forward and you feel like you're watching as an observer. We laughed and engaged in small talk for a while before Tony simply said,

“I can’t go with you.” My reply was “Why not?” Some people might not believe that I didn’t do more persuasion and you should ask Tony to be sure. He sat in silence for a while staring at the carpet and didn’t answer me. I don’t remember what else we said to each other, just that he asked me to pray for him. The Holy Spirit came on him with power, and he wept intensely. Later he confessed that he had avoided studying the Bible on the theological issues that were shifting in the Vineyard. He told me that he wanted to go back and study. I was afraid for him because I knew that an honest reading and study of the scripture would persuade him on the issue. And I knew that if he were persuaded on the theology, he would want to go with us. But it would be a hard road filled with many pressures and the loss of friends. Because of people who would be unhappy with him, he would have to rebuild his leadership structures from the ground up. It would not be easy!

Tony called me a few months later and asked me questions about what we were going to do as a new group of churches. I told him our plans (which were really no plans at all—I had no idea what we were doing and sure hoped that Jesus did!), and he told me that he wanted to go with us. Tony and Sarah had both had dreams about going with us and the Holy Spirit spoke to him in many ways. But, as with me, the practical implications were overwhelming and took time to process. So he paid back the money that had been given to help support the new plant and he left the Vineyard. The rest of the story I will let Tony tell because it’s his story. As for me, I was relieved that he was with us and thankful for his help and support.

The second event was with Noble Staley and One Way Church. It was the first church that we planted out of Vine. You will remember that we sent Noble prematurely under a “fly by the seat of your pants” model. They had gone by themselves, with Victor and Lori Maze faithfully joining them later from Vine. And while they had gathered numbers of family and friends from their

hometown, it was hard going. The church lacked health, and I was constantly concerned about what the future would hold for the church. The strain of unhealthy people and many personal attacks on Noble and [REDACTED] was intense. We knew that he would not be able to continue under such pressure indefinitely. Eventually, as problem after problem occurred in the church, Sándor and I recommended to their overseers that they close the church. It was difficult and caused me much loss of sleep. The only thing harder than starting a church is closing one! What would people do? Where would the faithful disciples go? How much additional pain would the charlatans and the wolves cause during the process? Ultimately the decision fell with their board of overseers, but they asked what I thought so I told them honestly.

As I expected, it was extremely painful. Some accused me and Noble, and others understood. Everyone was sad and wished that it wasn't so. But Noble and [REDACTED] showed great strength and faith in working through the process with integrity. They did what they could to love the people that they had gathered and help them process through the disappointment. Noble was a great teacher and pastor, but the combination of inadequate training, poor funding, no team, and going to his hometown made for a bad outcome. But understanding the issues didn't erase the pain of losing the church. I was relieved that Sándor brought Noble on staff at Vine and provided a place of healing and safety for Noble and his family. In the aftermath of this experience, I thought I heard the Holy Spirit assure me that we will never have to go through that again. I may have heard wrong, but I sure hope it's true. I decided that I don't like it when churches close.

## **Steady as She Goes**

The years 2006—2009 were characterized by a “steady as she goes” approach to faith at Blue Sky. Hold our course, keep going, and trust that Jesus will eventually produce a harvest through us. During this time the church grew to 300 people and many disciples were made. Small Groups were healthy (although we all had to be turned outward and back to mission once or twice, probably because of the slow growth causing a kind of inward comfort in being together). The worship team was maturing and identifying new team members. The network of churches was underway. Nothing was wrong, but it was like a foggy spring where you never seem to see the sun and you cannot see far enough ahead to be sure that you’re really keeping your course. At the same time, there were exciting things that happened during this time.

David Chery came on staff as our third pastor. He was passionate and raw and teachable, willing to obey Jesus whatever the cost. Because he had devoted himself to Jesus back in Carbondale and we had seen his character and growth over many years, it was like bringing on a dear friend who was a great encouragement to me. Ern and I were thankful to have another pastor with a bit less task-driven tendency than we ourselves had. He brought us into a good balance. Luke Williams, who had first visited a few times during the Meydenbaur days, was hooked by Jesus and his life turned right-side-up. His youthful zeal and deep devotion brought to me a kind of “remembering what we’re doing.” The Holy Spirit was on him and he was excited to reach university students (a passion of Blue Sky that had dimmed). When I asked him to come on staff as a pastor in August of 2009, he looked at me in shock and said “Me? There are so many others who are more qualified!” I loved his humility. Nelson Liu was new to us and experiencing God’s power for the first time in his life. Every time he would receive prayer or attend a retreat, he would weep with a sense of repentance and



calling for the future (especially in regard to Chinese coming to Jesus). They were all key pieces to the puzzle of the church that Jesus was bringing together. And there were so many faithful others that Jesus brought to us.

From the first experiences of direction to plant Blue Sky Church, Asians were a specific part of our purpose. We had felt such things as “there are enough Asians there to plant churches” in Taiwan and other Asian countries. We knew from the Bible that Jesus’ church must reach all people and, thus, by necessity the church should be multiethnic. Every local church must reflect the diversity of the people living in that specific city. The Seattle area is one quarter Asians. The team would pray with tears, longing for Jesus to bring Chinese and other Asians to the church. We had five Chinese and two from India on the original team (that’s fourteen percent!), and we were certain that Jesus wanted Blue Sky to become a church filled with the nations of Asia. And one at a time, they came! I was so excited when our annual survey in 2009 showed that Asians made up twenty-six percent of our average attendance. What kindness Jesus has shown us.

Jesus also brought amazing help in other ways. One night after Team Blue Sky a couple, told me the story of how at the previous team meeting the Holy Spirit had spoken to both of them independently that they were to give all of the profits from the house they had just sold. What an amazing thing to be a part of. It was just like standing there with Barnabas, called Son of Encouragement by the apostles! He had sold a piece of property that he owned and laid the money at the apostle’s feet to be used in the fledgling New Testament church. There I stood with two disciples of Jesus who were giving \$100,000 and some change—just like that! Disciples of Jesus, led by the Holy Spirit, had responded with such faith and love. Amazing! And what an encouragement it was. We weren’t asking for money; we had not announced a need. Jesus just did it. And help?

We had taken on a large lease and money was tight. Our growth was not quite supporting our expenses. Over the years, I have been prone to worry about the church finances and to feel the pressure of trying to act in faith and obedience while, at the same time, using wisdom in not stretching the budget too thin. Over the next year or two, that gift brought a relief from financial pressure to me and to the church. I should also tell you that a few weeks later they approached me with another check and told me how at the house closing there was a bit of extra money in addition to what they had given. They explained how they wanted to give the rest so that they didn't end up like Ananias and Sapphira in Acts, chapter five!! Ha! They were joking and light hearted in their generosity. What fun to serve Jesus with disciples like them!

While many from the original team were flourishing, others were tired from the pressure and changes of the previous years. And, probably the hardest on me, some became angry and left. I don't know if I will ever adjust to the experience of having a person who seemingly devoted themselves to the mission of Jesus' church go sour on what we are doing. It usually starts with some kind of complaint or rebellious heart. One pressed to be a leader and was jealous of newer members who were leading instead. Another just stopped living basic Christian discipleship and refused help when we asked to assist. Both situations hurt badly. I had invited them to Jesus years before and had watched them grow as followers of Jesus, given mercy after mercy during the process. As a pastor, I love the people and long for them to flourish though often, as the church grows, other leaders take the personal role of day to day care and encouragement. Some just can't adjust to these changes. And sometimes it just seems that, for now, the evil one was able to take them out. Regardless, I probably burned two years worth of emotional energy in two months worth of difficulties dealing with these situations. Thankfully, it has been rare over the fifteen years of leading a church. But the strain began to stretch me too thin.

During the summer of 2007, a strange grief and fear began to rise in me. It was overwhelming and filled with a kind of darkness that I had never known. I despaired in the emotional pain of it and the feelings of abandonment. It felt as if Jesus Himself had walked away from me and left me in a kind of hell that I had not even imagined. I received prayer frequently, but was unable to “snap out of it” as I desperately tried to do. I couldn’t pray it away, ignore it away, or reason it off my shoulders. But through the agonizing process of the pain, a vague theme began to develop.

Every time I received prayer, I found myself crying about my dad or for my dad. He had been electrocuted at work in 1986, when I was twenty-two years old. He lived in the hospital for ten days, but after amputation of both legs, he died from the injuries. The experience had devastated my life and my family. We didn’t know how to cope with it and no one could really help us. At the time, I tried to simply forget about it and go on, but my life began to spiral out of control with sin and despair. Then, by God’s mercy, he saved me in 1989; he pulled me out of the muck of my life and washed me of the stench and filled me with a hope that I had never known. But now, at forty-three years old, a deep pain and fear of being abandoned was gushing out of my heart, as if the gates of my control and avoidance could hold it back no longer. And, finally, I grieved.

But after twenty-one years of festering, it was no longer a clean grief. It had rotted inside me and was foul and ugly. I couldn’t find God; I knew the cry of David, “Do not take your Spirit from me.” While I found comfort in the Bible, it was just enough to keep me going and came in spurts of longing for Father to bring relief. But through a sort of vacation in the burning deserts of Arizona, Jesus began to heal my memories and emotions. I saw his funeral again and, this time, grieved through it properly as one who trusted Jesus. I said goodbye to him rightly, facing the reality of the loss that it had brought to my life. I agonized over the cost and futility of going into manhood,

marriage, and parenting without my dad to support me. And, eventually, there was nothing left to flood out and my emotions stilled and I began to regain my footing. Yet I still trembled that it was even possible to experience such darkness. It made me fear hell and separation from God as never before. Even the possibility of what would have happened to me, had he not rescued me from sin and death, filled my mind with horror. It made me eager for heaven and deepened my thankfulness for what Jesus accomplished on the cross!

## Real Progress

Fall of 2009 brought a consistent Sunday attendance of over 300 and thirty or forty new university freshmen. It felt like life blowing into Blue Sky Church. While growth was still not as fast as I hoped, it felt like a building momentum in the church. Church finances were strong, and we felt as if we were building leaders for something that God was about to do. While I was tired and the pressures of leading a local church and the network weighed on me, I was determined to press on or die in the process. Jesus had brought us to the Seattle area and, hard though it was, Blue Sky belonged to Jesus and he had a reason for bringing us there.

As we approached 2010, I felt like the Holy Spirit told me to pray for at least one hour a day during the break. We have always closed the office between Christmas and New Year's, and I was looking forward to "doing nothing." Struggling in prayer didn't sound exciting. I expected to do the kind of "watching the clock" prayer that I had often experienced, putting my time in to meet the requirements of obedience. And on the first day, as I began to pray, I felt the weight of resistance. But I pressed on and, after ten or fifteen minutes, an amazing thing happened. Lightness filled my heart and it was as if the Holy Spirit led me in prayer with ease and clarity. I wept at the wonder of His presence and love. I sang and prayed and listened for the direction of my Lord. "There is yet hope for the future" rang in my heart. My hope had grown dim through the years of struggle in planting Blue Sky, but I could feel faith filling me again. I felt God speak: "A generation may yet turn to Jesus." And my spirit leaped with excitement of what it would be like to enjoy such days of favor. Living in a city where so few had any desire or longing for Jesus had caused me to feel as if nothing could ever change. An hour of prayer became more and I was delighted by the experience.

The next day was the same. A hard start followed by a kind of wonderful intimacy and delight in prayer. Each day that week, it felt as if he would speak to me specific things to pray. One day I prayed for the church leaders, another day my family, and then the network of churches. It had been years ago with Larry and Carol in their living room since I had experienced such times of prayer. It felt like something was about to change and I longed for it to be so.

Sometime in early January, I felt like the pastors were supposed to set aside time to pray together each morning. If we were going to live in the midst of such spiritual fight in planting a church, we had better use the biblical weapon of prayer more effectively. We all wondered how we would ever get all of the work done with so much of our office time given to praying. I didn't know how we would and, honestly, I didn't care. We needed God's help and prayer was the means of cooperating with Him on this mission. I was convinced. So we began to pray together.

It amazed me how similar it was to my experience praying alone. During the first ten or fifteen minutes we were all so tired or distracted by thoughts of the day's tasks that we couldn't focus. But then a wonderful grace would come and we found ourselves weeping in prayer and the Spirit led us. All of us were overcome by His presence and overjoyed at the hope that he gave us. And during the weeks and months of praying each day, a clear vision of the things Jesus had yet planned to do through Blue Sky filled our hearts. Faith was rising in our hearts and a unity that we had never experienced gripped us firmly. Each of us found ourselves quick to talk honestly together about temptation and sin that we were experiencing. Our hearts were filled with a deep love for the people that we were leading and we frequently received direction in how to help or encourage the church.

Over the months it became painfully clear to me that I had led the churches like a business manager, seeing that everything was done but not attending to spiritual matters. We had felt Him clearly tell us that we must become spiritual men and it felt as if, through prayer, he was giving us spiritual eyes to see. The Bible came to life. Our worship experience was more free and joyful. Love for our spouses and children deepened. It was as if we, ourselves, were awaking from our “long dark slumber.” Like something out of Narnia, we had been breathing evil fumes that had lulled us to sleep in an unbelieving city and made us forget who we were and to whom we belonged.

During one of these times, the Holy Spirit spoke clearly that we were to bring Scott Bobsin on staff as a full-time youth leader. He was right on the cusp of making more money than he had ever made, and we asked him to leave it to make disciples out of Jr. High and High School youth. He risked it all and passionately jumped in. Then, though the longing for a Chinese pastor had been in my heart for ten years, we knew that we were to bring Nelson Liu on as a staff pastor. Nelson was a physical therapist and driven to succeed. We had watched Jesus systematically transform his life over the previous two or three years. Now he was filled with integrity, passionate about Jesus, and in love with a beautiful young woman named Amy. They were to get married in June. I approached him in April with a request that would blow his mind.

I really didn't know if he could do it. To walk away from his career, likely with the disapproval of his family, was not going to be easy. With a doctorate in physical therapy and a career well underway, there was a lot at stake. There were no guarantees. Just a hope and a vision that Jesus was going to reach many Asians and plant many churches in Taiwan and around Asia. We sat in my car in the parking lot of McDonalds near the hospital at which he worked in Seattle. I have always loved asking young men who are called to be pastors to give up their lives to follow Him; it's

a kind of living demonstration of a Christian's devotion to obey Jesus and is wonderful to witness. I came out with it as he was about to bite into his burger: "How would you like to quit your job and come on as a staff pastor at Blue Sky?" He nearly choked on that bite and stared at me with mouth hanging open. I could see in his eyes the swirl of consequences and sacrifices that would be required—the risk. He looked as if he was going to vomit right there in the parking lot, and I was shaken enough by the awareness of the price he would have to pay that I thought I might vomit with him. It's one thing to "give up everything" to follow Jesus in something like this if you don't yet have much (don't misunderstand...we can only sacrifice what we do have and should all offer ourselves to Him completely). But imagine it from the perspective of Zaachaus or Matthew or the rich young ruler or...especially Jesus. When you have a lot to lose...a lot to give up, the cost is higher.

Nelson asked me a few questions about how I could be sure that it was really Jesus. And I answered with some vague response about being sure myself but that he would have to be convinced in his own heart (a good way to get me off the hook in case I was wrong and really messed up his life). We talked about how his parents might respond and what Amy would say. We talked a little about what his responsibilities would be, but he actually cut me off and said "That doesn't matter. I just need to know if this is Jesus or not. If it is I have to do it no matter what the responsibilities." I gave him the standard line of "Don't answer now...take some time to think and pray." He silently got out of the car, and I drove away holding my breath for fear that he might not do it.

I talked with him the next day. Amy was excited and thought he should do it. His family...not so excited. But he said "YES!" He was scared and couldn't believe that he was really going to walk away from years of education and a promising, wealth-producing career—but he did.



What great fun to watch people surrender to Jesus, grow as disciples, and give everything of their lives as worship to their Lord. I've watched many do it as they followed Jesus in working their jobs and devoting themselves in a local church. I've watched them do it as Jesus challenged them to go with a church plant to become a foundational building block in a new church. And I've watched leaders and pastors do it as Jesus asked them to give up their jobs to be able to give all of their time to building up His church. It's always breathtaking to watch devotion being lived out through real followers of Jesus. Nelson passed the test and gave his all in response to the One who saved him. He's a disciple. Nothing more; nothing less. This is why we plant churches, endure trouble, and give our all to see that local churches are planted. Disciples for Jesus.

Another event that blew my mind happened during the spring of 2010. I had been praying since before planting Blue Sky for a church-planting fund. I wasn't completely sure what it was, just that I felt a repeated nudge to pray for millions of dollars for church planting. I started praying for two and worked my way up to twenty (million that is). It felt as if we desperately needed abundant resources if we were going to really plant healthy churches. I don't know how to count in millions, so I wasn't intimidated by the enormity of what I was asking. For seven years I had prayed. Then one ordinary day at my office, Todd (our administrator) walked in and said "I think you'll want to see this!" A check had come in the mail for the network church-planting fund for \$1,100,000 (I had to count the zeros)!! I couldn't believe it! For a couple of months different trusted people had said that they felt that the start of the fund would be coming soon. I liked hearing that, but believing it was another matter. There I sat holding a check for more money than I had ever seen. Heaven must have had a good laugh at my stunned response! During that same month another \$100,000 was given.

I was awake when I should have been sleeping that night, trembling at the responsibility of using that money well to plant churches for Jesus. It was a kind of fear of God that made me say, "If that money is in some bank account when Jesus comes, I'm in trouble! There better be healthy local churches to show for it!" I was well aware that it was just the beginning of provision to do what Jesus told us to do. Identifying the right men to plant churches and preparing worship leaders and making disciples that will risk everything to be on planting teams is now the challenge that lies before us. The money is not the big part—it's the people! It is men and women who really believe Jesus and His Bible. Local churches that live out what they believe with a radical, love-filled passion. People full of the Holy Spirit to empower and lead us as we feel our way forward on this mission. It's experiencing the faith and courage to not shrink back and to not give up. It's grace.

The rest of the story for Blue Sky Church has not yet been told. As of November 2010 at Blue Sky, we are just over four hundred in attendance and will start planting new churches when we reach five hundred people. Many more disciples will be made and new churches will be planted, whether quickly or slowly it doesn't matter. We have been experiencing a kind of joy and excitement about being a part of something bigger than ourselves. When I announced the new church plant, going from Vine to Ohio in July of 2011, our members were so excited. They have begun to feel the excitement of being a part of a network of churches.

## **No-name, No-account Network**

Seven churches now make up a “no-name, no-account” network of churches and this is our story so far. As I said, we are only orphans saved by grace, foundlings who have been welcomed into Jesus’ family. Jesus has called us to this mission—His mission. He has asked us to follow Him in building healthy local churches that make disciples and plant new churches. We do not exist for ourselves or simply to enjoy what he has done in these seven churches (although we do have much joy because of what he has done). He has called us to come up with a model for replicating ourselves through church planting—a simple model of doing church so that new church planters do not need to “reinvent the wheel” or “find themselves” in the process of planting. We want a clear, Biblical model for starting new churches in university cities.

This model is growing out of fifteen years of successes and failures as we have attempted to obey Jesus. There are a few things about this developing model of which we are sure. First, the model is relational. In an age of “bigger is better” and “shopping mall churches,” we believe that healthy churches are made up of people who love one another deeply and who are devoted to living out their faith together. Moving beyond self-serving church consumerism, we’re not just “passing through” or “committed for now.” We hope to spend the rest of our lives together on this mission of making disciples and planting new churches. We love each other and constantly feel thankful for the honor of living this out together. May we carefully watch our lives and our doctrine so that we will keep the unity of the Spirit through the years.

Next, we must identify the right young men to lead church plants. Men who have been tested and proven; men with godly character, bold hearts, and sharp minds. We must carefully discern the role that Jesus has chosen for each one so that they become everything he intends for them to be.

Some will be church planters and others staff pastors, worship leaders, or youth leaders. The church planters must be homegrown and thoroughly trained as staff pastors before planting so that they can easily replicate the values that we share. These men must serve well for three to five years on staff before we send them to plant. Character, humility, wisdom, knowledge, and practical skills will mature during these years; they will build trust and relationships that will provide critical support in the intense planting years to follow. If we go too fast, sending men that are not trustworthy or properly prepared, we will lose our way and future churches will become sterile and unable to multiply themselves.

Also, we must fund the church plants properly. While we started with a “whistle and a prayer” mentality of planting in which we hoped for the best and sent them with no teams or money, we have experienced the pain and trouble that this model produces. Each new church will need between \$200,000 and \$250,000 of support over the first three years and must be self-sufficient after this time. Because we don’t believe in “fund raising,” this money will come from the generous giving of our sending churches. Everyone participates together in giving to see that these new churches get established. The growing Church Planting Fund will be used to get more potential planters in the pipeline and to see that they are properly prepared. The money actually used to start the new churches will come from the tithes and offerings of the sending church, other churches in our network, and the planting teams.

Our goal is that, after reaching five hundred in average attendance, churches will plant a new church every other year. Some may say that this is not fast enough. Others will believe that it’s too difficult for the mother church to give such finances or part with the team members required to pull this off. And it is a sizeable challenge and we must get better at continually developing new leaders

and workers in each church. But if we can continue to identify and train the planters, worship leaders, group leaders, children's workers, and others needed, while keeping our values, we can plant a lot of churches over the next thirty years. If we allow an average eight years for new churches to reach five hundred, and they can then plant every other year, we can start sixty churches in the next fifteen years. If we can keep our focus and continue to replicate healthy churches for an additional fifteen years, thirty years from now we will have planted over four hundred churches!

It's difficult to fathom what the thirty years after that would hold, if Jesus has not yet returned. But those days will prove whether or not we have built a solid foundation on which those who come after us can build. While I know from history that in time most church groups lose their way through doctrinal failure or loss of vitality, I can't help but hope that somehow we might be given the grace to plant churches that will flourish until he comes. We desperately depend on the grace of God that we will not lose our way, that we will keep our heads down, and that he will keep us safe from the evil one.

One thing we know: Over and over, as long as time endures, Jesus will raise up for Himself disciples who give all for the joy of following Him. I constantly find myself fighting the thought that I wish it was easier. I wish more would come to Jesus...that there was less pain in the process. My heart aches to live in days of revival; to experience a time when millions come to Jesus, when tens of thousands of churches are planted, and the course of entire nations are changed. We pray for these days. We pray that God would release His power to save and heal and restore. And we may yet see such days! But we trust Jesus and we wait and we believe that He is carrying out everything for His own glory. What an adventure lies before us! I wish it was all "quickly maturing harvest," but it will

come. In time, he will come. Meanwhile, we live for Jesus. “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14).



## **Part 2: How we do Church**

In our network of churches, we understand the local church to be Jesus' primary vehicle for carrying out His mission of making disciples for Himself. We also believe that the models found in the New Testament for the local church are simple and functional. Doing church is not something for which we need a ton of creativity. We aim for functional structures with real people and relationships where God is worshiped, the Bible is clearly preached, leadership is developed, new believers come to Jesus, maturing disciples are trained and equipped in small groups, and new churches are planted. We want to do just a few things very well. For us, these "few things" are Sunday Service, Small Groups, Team Meetings, and our Series.

There is a temptation to constantly develop new ideas and new programs (usually we just mean MORE ideas and MORE programs) in lieu of sticking with the clear, simple models. We get impatient. Maybe we believe we can come up with a better way (or faster way). In our network of churches, we believe that style/practice changes with culture, but belief (orthodoxy) stays the same, firmly rooted in the Bible. While acknowledging that style/practice may change, we are also trying to develop a model for planting churches where new church planters are not trying to "reinvent the wheel" on how to do church. New planters and existing pastors should be spending their time in knowing the Bible, preaching, prayer, and leader development, not trying to choose graphics, set up computer systems, or find the best way to orient newcomers to the local church. We are looking for a foundation for our churches on which we can whole-heartedly agree. Finding it and staying with it is the only hope that we can replicate healthy local churches.



## **Sunday Services**

Sunday worship services are the weekly gathering of the whole church plus new friends. We live in the tension of being the church and welcoming guests. We're going to be culturally relevant and teach the whole Bible. We're going to speak to both followers of Jesus and those who don't know Him. The Sunday service is the best place for us to invite those who don't typically attend church services. It's our gathering pool. The main components of our services are announcements, Bible preaching, worship and praying for people. Worship and preaching stand side by side as the primary elements of the service; they are for God's glory and our maturity. We don't want superstar worship leaders or superstar preachers. That is not reproducible. Praying for people is not an afterthought; it is a critical part of the lives of maturing disciples.

New friends come to our services primarily through personal invitations and, as a secondary means, through our web site. We believe that Jesus' church should grow through relationship and personal invitations that believers extend as they live for Jesus daily. We want to fly under the radar, building a strong, relational foundation, not just drawing a crowd. We are not trying to draw people to the church by getting into the media by the controversial nature of what we say or do (and we would prefer to stay out of the media altogether). Because personal invitations are the preferred way of adding new people in a relational church, we have invitations cards that our people can carry with them to give to a person whom they invite. A great web site is important so that people moving into the area can find us when they are looking for a church and so that those who have been invited can get helpful information before attending a service.

## **Announcements**

Announcements help new people know how to navigate the church and help members know what is happening. Be sure that you have the right person doing them. If they are awkward, it will make everyone uncomfortable. If they are done by the right person who has properly prepared, they will make everyone feel welcomed and set them at ease. In deciding what to announce, the priority goes to events that affect the most people and events that are most central to the mission (the Series gets a higher priority than a youth party because it is the main vehicle for orienting new people to the church and preparing them for membership). Announcements should be brief with “Check out the web site for more information” as a key line. If you try to say too much, they’ll miss all of it. For a church that does worship first, the announcements would take place immediately after the worship ends. The order would go something like this: Pray following worship, welcome guests, point out the welcome card, upcoming events, and “offering baskets are coming around for the tithes and offering of the church” (in addition, a giving update is done by the lead pastor at the beginning or end of his teaching once a month). You will have to coach the persons doing announcements for a while to get them comfortable and skilled (and I say “persons” because you need a couple of people who can do this well). Be sure they avoid dumb jokes or trying to be new and creative every week. They should just be warm, confident, and get the job done.

## **Preaching**

The goal of preaching is to declare the truth and glory of God as found in the Bible so that people can respond to Him rightly. We train, equip, correct, encourage, rebuke, and challenge all for the purpose of making authentic disciples for Jesus. We teach the Bible, not our own thoughts, ideas, or opinions. That is, our teaching comes from the actual text of the Word of God. Preaching is not

supposed to be a collection of nice thoughts or devotional stories. We do topical, expository preaching. We want to teach the clear truth from the whole Bible; the Living God and His redemptive plan, Jesus and His death and resurrection, salvation and discipleship. What a challenging job! Biblical preaching most effectively accomplishes the intended, lasting impact when combined with life application in small group discussion and personal Bible study and reading. How many years would it take to rightly exposit every verse in the Bible? Teaching the church once a week on Sunday, it would take more years than any of us will live. Preaching, small group, and individual study/reading all work together as a healthy diet for the growing disciple. If, in our very mobile society, we have the average person in the church we lead for two to four years, we want to teach enough of the main and plain Bible doctrine in that period of time that people will mature as authentic disciples. Thus, the focus of our teaching is critical.

Because we interpret the entire Bible through the life and teaching of Jesus, all of our teaching is Jesus centered. We constantly talk about the cross and resurrection, as the apostles in the New Testament did. We weave the message of life through the death of Jesus into all of our teaching. We attempt to do all of this in such a winsome way that people listening would know God more intimately; people's thinking changes to a Biblical world view and they realize "this applies to me." Our hope is that the church and our new friends would say, "I didn't know Jesus was this real" and, "This was so relevant for my life." Biblical preaching always glorifies Jesus and makes the way of salvation clear to people. With such an amazing task, who is it that God calls to preach?

We believe that the preaching is to be done by some of the men who have been called to be pastor/elder/overseers (I'll talk more later about why we use the terms interchangeably). These are the men who are responsible for the doctrine and training of the whole church. The lead pastor is the

primary teacher/preacher, with one or two other pastors who teach also (it is the lead pastor who teaches most of the time with one or two others teaching once a month; the lead pastor is on three and off one). Not all of the staff pastors will teach the whole gathered church; only those specifically called and gifted to teach/preach in this larger gathering of the entire church. And it may even be that some called to such teaching must wait until there is an appropriate opportunity, such as when they plant a church (meanwhile they teach in discipleship community and other smaller contexts). Because we don't want people to follow only the lead pastor and we need to constantly be training others to do what we do, it's important to have a staff pastor teaching once a month from the beginning of every church plant.

We plan out our preaching schedules six months to a year in advance. We can do this because we know what the Bible says every believer needs to be a disciple of Jesus. Asking the question "what does the church need next to continue to grow and mature as disciples and to be built into a healthy local church?" is our basis for deciding what to teach next (this is done through prayer and by reviewing what we have taught already). We must be sure that we are teaching a well-rounded, healthy diet. We usually teach in 3-6 week series. If the series is too short, it doesn't give enough time to work the content into the people's heart and mind or give enough time to adequately cover the relevant Bible texts. Too long a series can feel overdone or keep the pastor from getting to all of the needed topics during a given year. We teach the main and plain truth over and over.

Generally our teaching lasts between 30 and 40 minutes, depending on the skill of the preacher. We teach from outlines that follow through the text and are drawn from the text. I've always insisted on pastors using a simple one page outline, even if they are so skilled that they could do it all from memory. The model for peaching must be replicable and be able to be well done by all

of those who are called to preach...not just an exceptional few. While some can teach “off the cuff” or from a complete written manuscript, neither of these two extremes can be done well by most people. A simple outline allows the preacher to organize by taking the text and breaking it down into logical “chunks,” following the line of thought in the text itself, thus, following the logic, order, and flow of the text itself. This also brings the preacher back to the actual text and keeps him focused in the Bible verses rather than reading a text and spending the rest of the time talking about related ideas. We read the text, explain the text, and apply the text for each logical chunk.

Preparing to preach includes reading and praying about the text before actually sitting down to prepare an outline from which to teach. Good preparation also should include reading a good commentary to be sure you’re using the text properly in its historical context and reading Systematic Theology on the topic to be sure that you’re teaching the text correctly in light of all of the other Biblical texts on the same topic. Then put the commentaries aside and go back to the text so that you are teaching the text itself and not the commentaries. With some time thinking and praying about the text during the prior week, along with a check-in with the commentaries, the preacher is ready to outline.

First, divide the text into three to four logical chunks, following the logic of the text itself. If you have too many chunks, you probably have too much text to appropriately cover in the time that you will have (that is...do fewer verses). Secondly, ask yourself, “What is the main idea that the author of the verses is communicating in this chunk?” You should be able to summarize it in a phrase or sentence. These become your main points (and your roman numerals in the outline). Then, under each Roman numeral, you explain the context and meaning of the verses. As many have said, “You explain the Bible with the Bible.” In this step you will often explain the verses by drawing on

other verses in the Bible that give insight into the meaning of the text (not simply “proof-texting,” but providing additional insight). Finally, be sure that you have good life application for most of the chunks of verses. This is answering, “What does this mean for us in our daily lives?” and “How would I put this into practice?” Sometimes you will use illustrations (“it’s like....”) and sometimes you will tell stories that drive the point home. All of this should be planned in the outline. For the pastor who is just learning to do this, it might take five to six hours or more. However, at least for the lead pastor who teaches regularly, it can be done well in two to three hours once he has some experience preparing. If it takes much more than this, it’s probably taking too much time to allow for all of the other responsibilities that he carries.

Maybe the most important issue in effective preaching is whether or not the pastor actually believes the text that he is teaching. Not just intellectually...that and much more! Does it move him? Does he live it out himself? Has his heart been broken in the Holy Spirit’s presence as he considers the people’s dire need to have the specific text impact their relationship with Jesus? I would suggest that if the pastor is not moved by the text intellectually and emotionally, he is not ready to teach it. More than spending hours and hours mulling over the text, this has to do with the pastor himself living as a devoted disciple of Jesus who loves the Bible. If you find yourself only reading the Bible to prepare to teach and not because you love and need His Word, you will likely have little moving conviction of the truth that you are teaching. It’s far too easy for us to end up teaching concepts without living in the spiritual reality of biblical Christianity. The pastors of the great awakening in the 1700s called real Christianity “experimental religion.” Preaching is meant to be experienced! It is Holy Spirit led, requiring the pastor to be a man who is regularly moved by the Spirit’s presence in prayer, worship, study, etc. He is living in the Word of God and the Spirit of God and, thus, he

nourishes and strengthens the church. What a terrifying responsibility to speak on behalf of Jesus to build up and encourage His dearly loved people in such a way that they understand Him more and experience His power.

## **Worship**

Jesus told the woman at the well in John 4:23, "But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him." Amazing! Father is seeking worshipers. In the coming of Jesus, a time had come when people would worship in spirit and truth. And then, consider the overwhelming images of worship in Revelation 4 and 5! The Living God and His power, majesty, might, holiness, and glory...angelic beings who never stop calling out "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" (Revelation 4:8). And the Lamb, looking "as though it had been slain" (Revelation 5:6) is revealed as the only one who is worthy. Why? "For you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God and every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9). Jesus who died to purchase people through His death...His shed blood. In heaven God the Father and Jesus the Son are the amazing objects of our worship! You cannot read such accounts of worship in heaven without being overcome with our need to learn to worship.

When Jesus told us to make disciples for Him (Matthew 28:19), it's clear that he had in mind for us to be disciples who worship. When he said we were to teach these disciples to "observe" all that he had commanded, he clearly intended for us to learn to be disciples who "worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:23). We could go on to the angels that Isaiah saw and recorded in Chapter 6 who were flying back and forth in presence of the Almighty, calling out to each other: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" (Isaiah 6:3). The building shakes and

Isaiah, with his sin still on his back, appropriately cries out in a right fear of God, "I'm a dead man!" God is worthy of our worship, and he's the Only One! Yet we have a serious problem when it comes to worship!

We love our own control. We seldom have enough humility to approach our God rightly. We are self-conscious far beyond our ability to be God-conscious. We believe that everything in life ought to be pleasing to us and, more devastating, comfortable! The woman wasn't comfortable as Jesus described the worshipers that Father was seeking. I'm sure the Apostle John was terrified as he observed the happenings of worship in heaven. And we know for sure that Isaiah was shaken to the core, not "comfortable," in the presence of the Almighty. Oh, that God would come down in the presence of His people that we could worship Him. Oh, that he would pour out the Holy Spirit to renew us and revitalize our worship. We desperately need the Holy Spirit to transform us into worshipers.

While it's true that we are "practicing for heaven" when we worship, we are clearly far too satisfied with simply singing a few songs. We've seldom if ever experienced the kind of worship of God where our heart delights and we stand in awe of who he is and what he has done! In this kind of worship, people weep in repentance and joy. No one performs; everyone pours out their love and affection to the God of heaven and earth. No one would dare draw attention from Him to themselves. Just as outpourings of the Holy Spirit are not times that we can create, the kind of freedom in worship that accompanies such outpourings cannot be put on. We wait and pray. We realize that things are not as they should be. We ache and long. We cry out with the Psalmist, "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?" (Psalm 42:2). I write all of this before getting to the practical issues so that we will not somehow believe that when we have done the



mechanics of worship we have experienced all that there is in worship. We cannot “put it on” but we can believe the Biblical descriptions of real worship and pray for such times of worship to be experienced in the church in our day. Now the structure of what we currently do.

We worship God for twenty to twenty-five minutes (usually 3-4 songs). In our world culture of iPods and iPhones we must recognize that the age of garage band hippies is gone. Music must be quality!! People are embarrassed by off-key, poor preparation, marginal voices, and bad imitations. They’re used to such quality when it comes to music that it’s a huge distraction to have anything less than great! We also highly value the basics of worship that we’ve held for years: real, no-hype, sung to God, cross-centered, expressed with voice and body, Bible balanced, culturally-relevant music (within the realm of “socially appropriate” for our new friends). We look for the “best of the best” worship music from the world, using a combination of worship songs, the best hymns, and new songs written by worship leaders in our network. We look for songs that are theologically accurate and have a sense of the Holy Spirit’s movement in them. If the worship leader is a worshiper, he or she will find such songs because they move his or her heart to worship. The worship leader’s role is essential.

In every church, the lead pastor must lead the worship leader (unless it’s a very large church where someone else is better suited to do it—then the lead pastor must lead the person who leads the worship leader). It is one of the most coaching-intensive relationships that I’ve had in my years of leading churches. It shouldn’t surprise us because the worship leader is the next most visible person in the church (if they’re odd, difficult, or lack Godly character it’s NOT GOOD). God takes His own worship very seriously. In my earlier days, I just let it happen and hoped for the best (well...if the truth be told...I complained from time to time ;-). Now I know what songs will be introduced (the

worship leader and I worship with them for months before we use them). I talk about sound quality and distractions during the set. I say “don’t do this” (i.e., call out “sing out now”) and I say “do more of this” (i.e., quiet spot where we felt God’s presence). The lead pastor must be a worshiper. You may not be very musical, but if you’re a worshiper you’ll notice distractions (where people drop out of singing or where their attention is drawn to the worship leader rather than Jesus).

The worship leader will need training in leading people—team members. How do they deal with different people? How do they communicate with the team on schedule? How do they effectively lead a practice? How do they identify potential worship leaders and team members? How do they coach the sound person? How are they doing personally? Relationally? If we care about God being worshiped, the lead pastor will put a lot of time, energy, and prayer into leading and training our worship leaders. Chris Miller, in addition to being the worship leader at Blue Sky, is our network worship leader. His job is to support the lead pastors and worship leaders with coaching and training. Lead pastors that are new to coaching their worship leader can turn to Chris as a resource to help them know how to help the worship leader grow and mature.

### **Praying for People**

Our churches pray for those who would like to receive prayer at our services. We inherited a model for doing this from John Wimber, and we don’t want to lose it. It’s a Biblical model. Jesus constantly ministered to individuals in the context of his preaching. Declaring the truth and demonstrating the truth. We teach Jesus crucified and risen from the dead. Then we pray for the power to help, heal, and save that is in our Lord. We can’t do these things in and of ourselves. We are dependent on the Holy Spirit’s empowerment and action every time we lay our hands on someone to pray for them. The writer of Hebrews talks about the “laying on of hands” (Hebrews 6:2) as an

“elementary doctrine of Christ.” Yet for many genuine Christians, they have no model at all for this kind of prayer. The experiences of Christianity have been reduced to intellectual pursuits. Praying for people in our services keeps us from becoming “heady” Christians that talk the right theology but have lost the practical models for doing what we believe. Here is how we do it.

When we’ve finished teaching the people, we invite them to stand, pray over all of them, invite some to come forward to receive prayer on specific issues (or just because), have a well-trained, proven team of members come forward with them and gently lay a hand on their shoulder to pray. The “topics” for which we invite people to come receive prayer may be related to the teaching that day, based in specific needs, expressions of commitment or renewed devotion, or may be for empowerment or impartation of spiritual gifts. The worship leader plays a “final song” during this time so that newcomers and those not coming up for prayer can engage in worship while others receive prayer. Finally, we close the service by praying a final blessing over everyone. While this segment of our service may feel vulnerable to new friends, we don’t want to lose our deep value and belief that our Christianity must go beyond what we can do so that we may believe what our God does. We ensure that the prayer time does not get too intense or scary (that is, deep emotional healing or deliverance, etc.). But we also expect God’s presence and power when we pray.

### **Inviting People to Jesus**

We are constantly inviting people to Jesus, but we understand that a person is not saved by their decision and, at best, a decision is the response of someone who has been regenerated by the secret work of the Holy Spirit. In other words, a person cannot believe in Jesus without the Holy Spirit’s work enabling them to believe. In the past, I would try to get people to accept Jesus, as if their act of accepting would then allow Jesus to come in and save them. I had it all backwards.

Getting someone to “make a decision” to receive Jesus assumes that they are saved because of their action in deciding. But the Bible is clear that we must be “born again.” Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). We can’t do that to ourselves. God does it for us! It is mysterious and wonderful!

When I tell the story of my own salvation, I attempt to describe what happened when I was reading C. S. Lewis’ “Mere Christianity.” But I don’t really know how it happened. I didn’t do it. I had tried to be good, change myself, and even follow Jesus. But I couldn’t. I failed every time. On that day, it wasn’t that I decided to believe in Jesus. It was actually more like I found myself believing! God had done something to me that I couldn’t do to myself. I had been “born of the Spirit.” Here’s Jesus’ description: “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). Call it what you like: saved, born again, or regenerated. It’s all the same and a person cannot do it to themselves. It is completely the choice and action of the Sovereign God; it is done by the eternal determination of God Himself.

While, from the beginning of planting Vine Church I have invited people to respond to Jesus in the Sunday services, I no longer ask this. I was wrong to do so. I was implying an incorrect theology about salvation. We should have known long ago simply based on the number of people who raised their hand and said yes, but clearly didn’t follow Jesus after that day. Some were truly being regenerated and when they raised their hand they were responding to the saving work that the Holy Spirit had already done in them. But others wanted to be saved, thought it would be a good idea, or were simply interested in Jesus. They weren’t ready. Or better stated, “He hadn’t done it to them!” To leave them thinking that what they experience by raising their hand was what it means to

become a Christian (saying yes but still being the same) was a great disservice to them. How different it is when a person is really born again! There is movement in them (or evidence that it has actually occurred). They are repentant of sin and heartbroken over sinful behavior. They don't want to live and think like that anymore. They begin to love the Bible (how many people I've seen coming to Jesus through the years that became so passionate to know the truth that they read the entire Bible in a short period of time!). A great change is being worked out in them. They are completely new; "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). It doesn't mean that they are perfect. But a great transformation has begun and there is evidence of this in their lives.

While I'm still working out how this change in my thinking will practically play out, I know that rather than asking every person that I pray for "have you accepted Jesus" (as I taught other people to do), I'm more prone now to talk with them about what happens when a person is being saved. What they will notice. The kinds of things they may think about. What it might feel like. Now I encourage them to ask Jesus to save them or grant them this new birth. I encourage them to seek Him and to believe/surrender if they are able to. Baptism is the great response that a person who has been regenerated makes to Jesus. Our pastors ought to meet with those seeking to be baptized and, through talking with them, find out if there is evidence that Jesus has indeed saved them. If so, they should decide to be baptized. Understand that the evidence will vary in intensity with different people. Some may have had dramatic change and an experience of the Holy Spirit's power. For others it may be simple, seemingly ordinary (yet actually miraculous) changes. In varying degrees, there will be sorrow for sin, faith in Jesus' death and resurrection, longing to know Him, and a great hope of forgiveness and acceptance. They also should be able to briefly and simply explain what it

means to be a Christian...basic Christian beliefs about how a person is saved. During Sunday services now, I frequently just tell people "If you are able to believe, do so!" I explain the death of Jesus and His resurrection, and I explain salvation, the forgiveness of sin and the giving of new life. If what is happening in a person is the real deal (e.g. if they are being saved), we don't have to worry. It will really happen and we will witness the marvelous change in their life.

## **Baptisms**

We generally baptize people in the Sunday service at least once each quarter. Water baptism is the critical public confession that a person makes after they have been saved—regenerated. The act of baptism itself does not save a person. Sometimes people will ask, "Is baptism necessary for salvation?" We respond by saying, "Baptism is not necessary for salvation, but it is necessary for obedience." And obedience is evidence of true salvation. All accounts in the Bible clearly assume that when a person has believed, they are baptized in water. You might call it a person's first act of obedience.

In Acts 2, the 3,000 new believers were baptized. In Acts 8, Philip baptized the Samaritans who had been saved and the Ethiopian eunuch was baptized. In Acts 9, after his dramatic encounter with Jesus and Ananias' visit to Saul, he "rose and was baptized." In Acts 10, when Cornelius and all of his family and friends believed and were baptized with the Holy Spirit, Peter replied "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people..." (v. 47). In Acts 16, after Paul and Silas had been beaten and were worshiping in the jail, God moved with great power and broke the jail open with an earthquake. After begging Paul and Silas, "What must I do to be saved?" (v. 30), Paul preached to the jailer and his entire family. They believed and were "baptized at once" (v. 33). In Acts 19, the

twelve men in Ephesus believed and “they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (v. 5). Overwhelmingly, the Bible is clear that those who have been saved should be baptized.

So we practice a “believer’s baptism” and do not baptize infants or very small children. I encourage parents to get younger children to wait until they are a bit older and have had a significant salvation experience that will last in their memory into adulthood. We get far too many college students that were baptized as children but had no clear idea of what they were doing. Many do not even remember the event. Depending on the maturing of the child, I encourage them to wait at least until Junior High or High School. My oldest daughter, though she had talked with me about baptism off and on for years, was finally baptized recently at thirteen years old. She asked me about it after a year of wonderful experiences with Jesus and spiritual maturing. It was time.

We baptize people in our Sunday service so that the whole church can celebrate what Jesus is doing in regenerating people. Also, we want all of the people who have not yet been saved and/or baptized to witness the response of those who are doing so. We also encourage those being baptized to invite their friends and family to share in this experience, hoping that those who do not yet know Jesus might come into a church service and be stirred by what they hear and see. It is an amazing time of joy and celebration in the church. Our baptisms usually take the place of the normal prayer ministry time at the end of the service. While we may, from time to time, baptize people spontaneously at other times, for the reasons stated above I prefer for them to have the experience of being baptized with the church present.

In the past, I would from time to time ask, “Is there anyone else who would like to be baptized?” However, we have recently realized that the pastors should have some kind of assurance

that the people being baptized have actually been regenerated. Spontaneously asking “who else” runs the risk of encouraging people to be baptized based on a good feeling or hope of knowing Jesus, rather than upon a genuine salvation. If they have been or are being saved, their devotion will last and they will have a chance to meet with a pastor to talk about what has been taking place in them before being baptized. This allows us to hear their story, ask questions about what they believe, and instruct them on basic Christian issues of doctrine.

During the actual baptisms, we call those being baptized to the front of the auditorium and have someone who has been asked to pray for each person come up at the same time (their small group leader when possible). Then the pastor leading the service explains baptism to the church and asks those being baptized to make the following affirmations:

- 1) Do you turn from your sin and confess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ?
- 2) Do you promise, by God’s grace, to follow Him for the rest of your life and to live out your faith with His people, the church?

After responding to these questions, the pastor and the entire church pray for them (while the small group leader or other person lay their hand on them and pray). Sometimes this is relatively quick and other times we linger in prayer for a while. At times, the people being baptized are weeping with thankfulness for Jesus and His salvation. During other times it is gentle and quietly simple. Then after we have prayed for them they go into the water one at a time and are baptized by one of the pastors. I almost always have one of the DC pastors doing the baptisms, and I don’t allow a friend or family member to do this. I don’t want people to confuse friendship or family love with the experience of being baptized into Christ. It is not a sentimental event. Rather, it is a profound spiritual experience in response to Jesus and it has eternal significance. I want one of the local



church pastors to do the baptizing. And when the last person comes up out of the water, the worship team plays and the whole church worships Jesus for His amazing grace and mercy in saving us!

## Small Groups

Small groups are the foundation of our churches. Those who are committed in our local churches are in relationship with others through our small groups. Most churches stop growing before they reach 100 people because they have set up infrastructure where the lead pastor and possibly just a few others are responsible for caregiving, training, and praying for everyone in the church. We believe that the lead pastor/overseers have the role of providing leaders to serve the people in this way. Many churches are structured as “Sunday morning” churches, where crowds gather but being in relationship and disciple making are difficult. In a small group church, each group leader then has the responsibility of providing the care, training, and prayer for 8-15 people (and even these group leaders cannot do this well alone; they must have a core of others who serve alongside them). If we choose the right deacons/leaders and train, coach, and support them well, we can make many more disciples than if we are trying to do it ourselves as pastors (see the section “new leaders” for more on choosing the right group leaders).

Our purpose in every small group gathering includes Bible discussion, relationships, and prayer. Our small groups are not “Bible Study” groups. We preach/teach the Bible in our Sunday services. We train our people to study the Bible as a part of their daily life (a Bible, a good two-volume commentary, and “Systematic Theology” is all they need for this). In Small groups, we do LIFE APPLICATION of the Bible. That is, “Here is a text from the Bible...here is the context...how does this apply to our lives? How do we put it into practice?” We do this because we want disciples who “obey everything” Jesus has commanded (Matthew 28:20). Real people who live what they believe. The life application approach gives the group members the opportunity to work out

following Jesus in the context of loving relationships. Our group leaders do not need to be great teachers (although they are required to have solid doctrine); they need to be good facilitators.

We do life application of the Bible primarily through asking discussion questions that get the group talking about each Bible verse, it's meaning, and how it applies in our daily lives. The questions are drawn from the text, with the goal of drawing people into the Bible (that is, we don't just pick a topic and have a devotional-type discussion with a few Bible verses thrown in). The questions follow the intent, logic, and order of the verses in the chunk of text being used.

Healthy relationships are essential to a healthy, disciple-making church. We want to constantly be providing a context where people can build authentic friendships and include new friends among us. The idea of "going to church" and not knowing anyone is foreign to us (maybe "tragic" is a better word). The New Testament church in Acts 2:42-47 is the model for relationships in the local church:

*"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."*

Pretty amazing! Who wouldn't want to be a part of a church like that? The importance of large group gatherings where they worshiped and the apostles would teach them is obvious. But the description of just how they were together is shocking! They "were together" and, it appears, really wanted to be. Such sharing and joy in meeting one another's needs. They were in each other's homes, eating together and praying together. And they were constantly adding new friends who were being saved. They loved each other. They liked getting together, and I think it went even further than that; they couldn't help constantly getting together and talking, worshiping, and praying. They were in awe of God.

The final purpose in our small groups, prayer, was clearly such an important part of what they were doing together. "The prayers," as it is said in Acts 2:42, is one of the main things to which they were devoted, and "praising God" would have constantly been expressed in prayer. I don't think it was something that they were trying to do; I think they couldn't help themselves! This new life had overcome them. Jesus had made them new. I suspect that they prayed constantly. They undoubtedly prayed for one another, prayed that their friends and family members would come to Jesus, prayed for the sick, and expressed their awe of God in prayer. For us, small groups are the place where people learn to pray in the context of the Bible and real relationship. I constantly hear people say that they don't know how to pray or what to say in prayer. But in the safe context of friendships that are together in following Jesus, people learn to pray together and for each other.

While we fall far short of Jesus' church as found in the book of Acts, it is our goal—by the grace of God—to be that kind of a church. The Holy Spirit had worked such a wonderful transformation in them and we long for Him to do the same in us. So while our model of small groups is imperfect, it is our best effort to create a context where authentic discipleship can grow.

The practical issue of how we've organized our groups is not the life of the groups; it is simply the environment that we provide in which we long for Jesus to build His church.

Here are some of the details about how we do small group. First, people choose where they want to attend small group rather than having us tell them where to go. If the relationships are to be real, people need to "self-serve" in finding a small group where they feel there is the possibility of friendships growing. You can't force true friendship. It grows between people who share purpose, interests, and time spent together. We provide the best information that we can about the small groups, both on-line and at a "group center" in the Sunday service. Information about the leader, the demographics of the group, meeting time, location, and childcare are helpful to people looking for a group. Then people have to choose to find a group that fits them. Because people who are new to the church almost always come to the Sunday service first, most people find their way to a small group through group members who have been kind and welcoming to them.

In most cases, our small groups meet on a weeknight during the first three weeks of the month, reserving the fourth week for parties and serving. The Lord's Supper is frequently done in groups or at the Team Meeting when the church is small. Later, the Lord's Supper will be done in Discipleship Communities that are added when the church reaches 200-300 people. After this, the first week of the month each of the groups meet in their Discipleship Community and in homes for the rest of the month.

Just a note on keeping the groups outward focused. As a church grows, somewhere between 100 and 200 people everyone has more friends than they can possibly interact with on a regular basis (that is, if the community is relationally healthy). The church at this point faces "relational gridlock";

everyone wants to know everyone else in the church. They enjoy being around each other so they fill their lives with church people. We must teach people that Biblical mission trumps our relational comfort. If everyone in the church will focus on their small group and the potential new friends from the Sunday service to bring into group life, the church will flourish. Using an image from Nehemiah, everyone must focus on their portion of the wall! When each group understands that their responsibility is building the portion of the wall assigned to them (their “sphere of influence” including their small group and discipleship community) and trusts that everyone else is covering their own sections of the wall, everything will get done. If leaders and core group members start filling their life with relationships NOT in their sphere of influence (people from other small groups and discipleship communities), the growth of the church will come to a halt. New friends will not be able to get in on relationships in the church. They may come into the Sunday service for a time, but no one will ask them to lunch, have them over for dessert, and introduce them to core people that could be friends.

When this is happening, you will notice that baby and wedding showers are getting huge in size, because people are inviting everyone to everything. You will also notice that parties and social events that ought to be a small group event or gathering of two or three small groups become massive events on Facebook where nearly the entire church is invited. You have to teach the church why it is important for everyone to focus relationally within their sphere of influence. Relational gridlock does not happen because the faithful believers don’t want to reach new friends, but because their lives are too full of other people. They have lost their outward focus for the joy of loving relationships within the church. The lead pastor must constantly encourage the church outward, reminding the people of the cost of following Jesus on His mission to make disciples.

## Discipleship Communities

By the time Vine had reached 300 people or so, we were well aware that continuing to make authentic disciples was a great challenge as the Sunday crowd grew larger. Some people wanted the church to remain small (i.e. quit making new disciples) because a bigger church meant losing the sense of friendship and family with everyone. Some wanted to attend Sunday service and not get more involved in the mission; it was easier to hide as the church size increased. And small group leaders began to get lost in the mix of all of the other leaders; the quality of what happened in groups decreased.

The pastors were at a conference where a leader said “most small groups are better at spreading heresy than spreading truth.” It started me thinking about the issue. Small group leaders wanted to do well and many sacrificed so much daily to care for the people that they were leading. But none of them were getting enough coaching and encouragement. There just wasn’t enough time to get to everyone, let alone visit their groups to see where they needed help. It was like trying to coach a soccer team without ever watching them play. Group leader skill level was frequently inadequate and burnout level was high because of the lack of support. At the same time, we were asking our small group leaders to function with a skill level expected of those called to be pastors (i.e., coming up with their own topics, texts, etc.) and, thus, we couldn’t find enough group leaders for a growing church. What we expected of them in those days was way too much!

If we were going to make disciples, we had to have a small group system where each small group leader had great training, ongoing coaching (including visits to their group), and where the expectations were realistic enough to have a leader for every 10-15 adults in the church. We also

needed to provide a context where everyone could know people beyond just the 8-12 people in their small group. They needed some kind of midsize community that functioned like a small, relational church within the larger church. So we started what we called Discipleship Communities (sometimes lovingly called DCs).

Here's how they work: A staff pastor oversees five to eight small group leaders on a given week night (e.g., all Tuesday groups make up a Tuesday night DC). Every church starts DCs somewhere around 200 to 300 in Sunday attendance. At this size, the lead pastor or a staff pastor can no longer even come close to effectively coaching all of the group leaders. A church with 15 to 20 small groups may have three or four DCs and, thus, need to have three or four staff pastors in addition to the lead pastor (while it may temporarily be done, we've found that it's very difficult to have non-staff DC pastors; the responsibility involves too much for someone who also works another 40-50 hours a week and communication with the other pastors is difficult). The ideal size for a discipleship community is around 40 to 60 people, but no larger than 80. When they get too large, the relational connections are diminished and the number of small groups becomes too large to coach effectively. Because we are constantly multiplying small groups, we also have to constantly start new discipleship communities as the number of small groups increase.

To help keep the small groups focused together on the mission of the local church and to assure that the groups are discussing relevant, disciple-making Bible texts, we have twenty-four discipleship topics, and we cover one per month over two years. Each DC topic is also the small group topic for the month. During the first week of the month, all small groups on a given night meet with their DC pastor at the church facility for Bible teaching, worship, the Lord's Supper, prayer, and snacks. The pastor's teaching is 20 to 25 minutes and is designed to introduce the small group topic



for the month. The goal is to give a doctrinal foundation and focus for the small groups. Sample outlines for the DC pastors have been developed at Blue Sky Church and are sent out to each church for their pastors to adapt with their own style, approach, and applications. Suggested texts for the group leaders to use during the rest of the month are given to all group leaders at the Team Meeting as each month begins. So...the first week of the month all of the DCs meet on their given night and then all of the small groups meet out in their homes, apartments, and dorm rooms for the rest of the month. The DC pastor then visits each of the small groups in his discipleship community to provide coaching and encouragement to the leaders (getting to each group at least four times a year).

Another note: While the lead pastor will initially lead the discipleship community pastors and see that each of the pastors is well trained (e.g., coaching them in teaching, multiplying groups, etc.), one of the DC pastors will need to become the overseer of the entire DC system. This pastor helps keep the rest of the pastors well focused and sees that we're on track with disciple making. All of our staff pastors have many responsibilities in addition to leading a discipleship community. It's extremely challenging to stay balanced on leading a DC and taking care of other responsibilities related to facility, Sunday services, Team Meetings, the Series, integrating new people, etc., etc. The DC overseer will help the other pastors prepare for group multiplications and problem solve when small groups have challenges to overcome. Further, he will help the lead pastor train new DC pastors that are coming on staff.

One of the wonderful things about the discipleship communities is that the role of DC pastor is our training ground for church planters. Most, but not all, of the new pastors that we bring on staff will be potential church planters in training. Leading a DC gives them much of the experience needed in leadership, theology/Bible teaching, and vision/values for our churches. Because each

church planter must train on staff for three to five years before planting, being a DC pastor is the perfect preparation. Some will be needed as long-term staff pastors and will never plant. These pastors will become the leadership foundation that helps develop many young pastors for planting new churches. If we send everyone, we will lose the ability to continue raising up new planters fast enough. The discipleship communities exist for the purpose of carrying out this larger mission that Jesus has given us of making disciples and planting new churches.

One final issue: Because the DC pastors and their wives are no longer attending a small group themselves, it can be challenging for them to have the on-going prayer and relationships that are found in group life. While some DC pastor wives will continue going to their own small group, others will choose to visit groups with their husband and help in supporting the women in the small groups. While the pastors have a kind of built-in "small group" by being on staff with the other pastors, most of the wives lack this context for ongoing support and relationships. Further, the lead pastor regularly interacts with the staff pastors but gets little time to encourage and lead their wives. I've found that having a once-a-month DC pastors and wives small group is very helpful in addressing these needs.

By leading the DC pastors and wives small group, the lead pastor and his wife have an opportunity to be with the others and offer the care and encouragement that is needed. It also allows the lead pastor to model what a healthy small group looks like so that the DC pastors have this experience from which to coach the other group leaders. The opportunity to regularly pray for the spouses of our pastors has been one of the most valuable aspects of doing this group. It helps their marriage. It helps the wives feel a part of the larger mission. I can deal with issues from the Bible that strengthens their marriages. And our friendships grow as we spend this time together. In

addition to all of the other benefits, doing this group helps prepare both the pastors and their wives for the challenge of church planting. We've sometimes found that we did a good job preparing the pastor for planting a church, but overlooked the preparation and help needed by his wife to get her ready for the future challenge.

## Leadership

Leaders are the foundation of the church and, thus, leader development is one of the few priorities for a lead pastor (Bible preaching, prayer, and evangelism are others). Jesus made the training of the twelve Apostles a primary focus of his time and energy. Acts through Revelation is filled with direction regarding leadership for the local church. Ephesians 4:11-15 clearly lays out the practical purpose of leadership:

*“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ....”*

Preparing God’s people. Building up the church. Unity in faith and knowledge. Maturity. Join these verses with Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus’ commission, to make new believers that grow into mature disciples:

*“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

Outward church. New believers. Life changing teaching. Disciples who obey Jesus' words. Then add the greatest commandment in Matthew 22:37-39:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

We find that we are to proclaim Jesus, making disciples for Him, and leading them into a life of loving God and loving people. In a healthy local church, the people are growing up in Jesus spiritually and constantly reaching outward to those who have not yet believed. Worship and evangelism. Worshipers and new believers. Our job as leaders is to see that this happens.

## **Overseers**

Timothy and Titus contain the clearest descriptions of “how and who” in the development of overseers. While many people use the term “pastor” loosely to describe any leader that serves on staff, I believe that pastor (or pastor/teacher) is used interchangeably with “elder” and “overseer.” Thus, pastors must meet the qualification of overseers found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. We agree that the pastor/elder/overseers must be chosen from among the men (this is clear in 1 Timothy 2:8-15, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, 1 Corinthians 14:33-38. Further, in the fact that Jesus chose twelve men to be apostles while not shying away from confronting any sinful customs of his culture; he affirmed male oversight of His church in doing this).

These men must be proven in character, lifestyle, family, reputation, ability, and doctrine. They are responsible for leading the entire church, with the lead pastor as the “lead overseer.” They must be able to teach the Bible (although not all of them will have this responsibility—1 Timothy

5:17). They are not self appointed but, rather, appointed by trustworthy, existing overseers. The list of qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 is mostly descriptive of the requirements for overseers, although none of us have yet reached perfection in all of these. We choose to be relationally accountable to our fellow overseers, helping and encouraging one another in the responsibility that Jesus has entrusted to us. Our job is to serve, teach, correct, lead, protect, equip, provide, and guard doctrine. We oversee all aspects of church life and make decisions regarding direction, doctrine, staff/leaders, and finances. The lead pastor is responsible to cast vision and to lead the other overseers. Some overseers will have responsibility to teach/preach (usually lead pastor and staff pastor—and, in larger churches, others such as DC pastors). Still others will have responsibilities coaching/leading small group leaders. Some will serve primarily as board members. The pastors that serve as staff are responsible for programming and for daily decisions in the function of the church (communicating as needed with the other overseer/board members).

The overseers are also responsible for protecting the church. We know that “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). There is a spiritual fight that the evil one wages against Jesus’ church and the overseers lead in protecting the church through truth, righteousness, readiness, faith, assurance of salvation, the word of God, and prayers (according to Ephesians 6:14-18). Like Timothy was told by Paul to “keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching” (1 Timothy 4:16), we are to be spiritual men who are attentive to how we live and to our Biblical doctrine. This is the foundation of what it means to protect the church; overseers that crash and burn with moral or doctrinal failure cause a profound harm to the church.

Further, we need to protect the church from people who would cause great harm. Paul tells the Roman church “to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them” (Romans 16:17). He also tells Titus, “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned” (Titus 3:10-11). Timothy is warned about Hymenaeus and Alexander who “have made shipwreck of their faith” (1 Timothy 1:19-20). And again, about Alexander, Paul warns young Timothy, “Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message” (2 Timothy 4:14-15). Not to mention the damage that Ananias and Sapphira almost did to the infant church in Acts 5 by trying to draw attention to themselves through a lie about their giving.

The overseers are to protect the health and unity of the church by defending the people from those with bad hearts and bad doctrine. Those who are unteachable, arrogant, self-promoting, unrepentant in sexual immorality, gossips, and unwilling to follow leaders all must be helped by the overseers, in hopes that they will turn and change. Look at Paul’s list: “But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people” (2 Timothy 3:1-5). My experience has been, as Paul says, that most of the hurtful people have the “appearance of godliness” (e.g., religious, church people); the very character evidences that are present in a regenerated person seem to be absent; they have a form of

religiousness while “denying its power.” The overseers must watch carefully and wisely to guard the church from such people.

The goal is to protect the church and, if possible, help these individuals to repent and follow Jesus whole-heartedly. We never know simply based on a “gut feeling” what the person truly will prove to be. However, the spiritual gift of discernment is wonderfully helpful in knowing when and where to be attentive. When the overseers feel uneasy about how someone will affect the church, they should watch carefully, still reserving judgment. We generally don’t confront a person or take action to redirect them until they have acted in ways that are inappropriate. In other words, you usually can’t act on gut feelings alone; behaviors are actionable. Still then, the goal is to help the person turn in most cases. If the person is repeatedly found to be the source of gossip, we say, “Why is it that every time we hear of gossip occurring in the church, your name is right in the middle of it?” If they respond well and change, we’ve won them. If they respond poorly and are unwilling to be helped, there is little chance that they will be able to be a healthy part of the church and will have to be asked to leave. A bad heart will almost always be exposed in a person when we ask them to change a behavior or tell them “no” about something that they want to do. So, we follow Paul’s direction “as for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him” (Titus 3:10).

A few final notes of caution: Every time there is a situation like this, be sure that it has been carefully thought, talked, and prayed through. Never touch the person physically, even if asking them to leave the building. Try not to deal with these things in the Sunday service where they can cause a scene. But with some people (i.e., those not in a small group, not members, very new, just attending Sunday service), it’s the only place you can get the opportunity to talk with them. Be sure



that the lead pastor does not have to deal with this on Sunday; some of the overseers, usually a couple of staff pastors, must become expert at doing this and protecting the lead pastor from having to do it himself. Be kind and gentle, but clear, in your words (not argumentative). Keep careful notes in a file about what actually occurred and how it was handled. Most of the time, people in these situations have not made it as far as becoming a member. But if they have, it must be dealt with as follows: First, talk with them alone (if the situation feels unsafe, you may have to have someone else with you or at least be in a public place) with the hope of a quick resolution and a genuine willingness to change behavior. Second, if the problem continues, warn them more firmly as "if you don't deal with this, the overseers will need to consider what to do next to resolve this problem." Third, the board will have to give due process through a disciplinary group of overseers to deal with the situation (see by-laws). Again the goal is that they change. But where there is clear evidence that they are not willing or able to deal with it, ask them to leave and not return. Just be sure that it is all done carefully and according to Biblical and legal requirements. The good news is that this kind of thing does not happen frequently. However, it does happen and the overseers must be well trained and prepared to resolve these types of problems well.

### **Function of a Board of Overseers**

The overseers of a local church are both the legal and spiritual government of the church. As the legal government of the church that is accountable to the state, they are responsible for incorporating, maintaining current by-laws, making financial decisions, keeping accurate financial records, recording minutes of decisions made, etc. As the spiritual government, they are biblical overseers, responsible to Jesus for leading the church in all areas of belief and practice. The lead pastor serves as the "president" of the board and leads the other overseers as the one called to carry

the vision of the specific local church. The lead pastor keeps a running agenda of items that need to be prayerfully considered at upcoming meetings, while other overseers may always add items to the agenda. To oversee the financial aspects of leading a church, the board should meet at least quarterly to review giving and spending. Provided that the lead pastor is talking with the other board members frequently, this quarterly meeting is usually sufficient for making decisions on all of the current issues for the church. The overseers may meet regularly or as needed to pray together for the church.

The board for a new church should be small (3 or 4 members) and should include the sending pastor. Only the men that the lead pastor, and sending pastor, agree are called, and adequately prepared to serve on the initial board should be included (meeting the Timothy and Titus qualifications). The goal is that they would be elder/overseers but, with a new church plant, when there is not yet anyone who is clearly an overseer, a man who is a deacon/leader might serve for a time (until the Holy Spirit makes clear who the overseers for the new church will be).

Board members are appointed by the lead pastor, and the appointment is ratified by the existing overseers (for a new church this is the planter, sending pastor, and the leader of the network). As a general rule, we strive to have at least two board members that are not on staff to keep a good balance for accountability. It is essential that the board members are willing to follow the lead pastor and have trusting relationships with each other. It's a good idea to ask initial board members to simply serve on the board for one year, not making them "overseers" immediately. This gives you time to be sure that you've discerned their calling and readiness properly. We do make mistakes in choosing leaders and would be wise to follow Paul's counsel to Timothy: "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands" (1 Timothy 5:22). If they really are called to serve as an overseer, it will be confirmed during that first year as God puts more wisdom and authority on their service.

Our by-laws outline the procedure for “voting” on decisions, but we always discuss and pray together until reaching agreement on what is best. I don’t think I’ve ever gone forward on a decision if I had a board member that had unresolved concerns. Not because I didn’t have the authority, but because I so trust the men with whom I serve as overseers, that one member’s concern is certainly enough to make me take the time to consider the issue further. If we simply functioned as a democracy, we would just vote and push it through, but we are men responsible to Jesus for the oversight of his church.

As a church gets over 300 people, the board may increase in number to five members (later, possibly six). If it gets too large, it’s difficult to get everyone together and make decisions. In even larger churches, the senior overseers (the lead pastor plus the most experienced staff pastors) meet frequently to make ongoing decisions, while the rest of the overseers serve in other capacities (such as DC pastor or financial/accountability board).

### **Contracts Team**

The Contracts Team is generally made up of the lead pastor plus the non-staff overseers on the board. It may include a deacon/leader that is not on the board but, ideally, these are overseers from the board. Because staff overseers do not know the salary of others, board members that are staff pastors cannot serve on this team (with the exception of the lead pastor who heads the team and helps decide on everyone’s contract but his own). In addition, another lead pastor from a church in our network also serves on the Contracts Team to help with decisions regarding the lead pastor’s contract. Because no one is ever involved in decisions regarding their own salary or contract, obviously the assistance of an experienced lead pastor from an established church is a great help for the team in understanding how to best take care of the local lead pastor.

During the first year of a new church plant, all contract issues are dealt with by the Contracts Team of the sending church. After this time when a church is still small, the team may only include the lead pastor, another network lead pastor, and one non-staff board member. Four to six total members is probably as large as it ever needs to be.

The Contracts Team meets annually to review all staff contracts. On all contracts except his own, the lead pastor makes recommendations to the team on changes or increases. Decisions on setting salaries are influenced by issues such as responsibility level, importance to the mission of the church, performance, education, years of service, needs of the staff member's family, etc. While we understand that our pastors and staff are called to sacrifice in serving Jesus, we want them to meet their financial responsibilities, take care of their families, and be able to do things for relaxation and enjoyment. While we try to give regular raises to the base salary, it is not always possible. I expect that we have had raises at Blue Sky in about half of the years since we began. During the other years, church finances would not allow us to raise salaries, regardless of the performance or needs of the staff. It always amazes me that individual staff members have such amazing attitudes of humility in these circumstances. Even in bringing on new pastors, I've been amazed as young men who were taking dramatic pay cuts to accept Jesus' call would tell me "It doesn't matter what the money is, as long as it's really Jesus asking me to do this!" That is a right heart.

The team will follow the guidelines in the staff policy manual on many issues such as vacation time, but also has the freedom to make decisions that are appropriate in the care of our staff. We sometimes will vary from the guidelines based on the individual's needs. A staff member that is working too much and not getting enough time away for rest needs an additional week of vacation. Or we may give additional retirement to a staff member that is older and has not had opportunity to

save properly for this purpose. The goal is to reward staff for faithful performance and to see that the church provides for them well.

## **Leaders**

Deacon/leaders are men and women (like Phoebe in Romans 16:1) who are appointed to lead some smaller portion of the church, while overseers are responsible to lead the entire church. The most common deacon/leader responsibility in our churches is small group leader, but such roles as worship leader, children's director, youth leader, administration, outreach to poor, women's leader, hospitality leader, etc. are also deacon/leader responsibilities. The job is to assist the overseers in carrying out the mission of making disciples, as with the seven men chosen to take care of the distribution of food so that the apostles could give themselves "to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4).

Paul tells Timothy that deacon/leaders "must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first" (1 Timothy 3:9-10a). They need to be around the church long enough that their character, ability, faithfulness, and beliefs are known. They must be proven enough that we can trust people into their care and to their leadership. We're frequently tempted to give people these responsibilities that are "good and faithful" (that is, they fit the character qualifications), but neglect the issue of winsomeness or how well they are respected by others inside and outside the church ("worthy of respect" 1 Timothy 3:8a). We've also under-emphasized training leaders on sound doctrine and have learned the hard way what happens when we have people leading that don't hold to Biblical Christianity.

We must be careful not to make the mistake of thinking that the overseers are the ones with spiritual power and authority and the deacon/leaders are those who didn't measure up to the calling of pastor (so we let them serve as deacons). Such thinking is far from a Biblical understanding of the servants who were deacons in the New Testament. When you read the qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 for overseers and deacons, there is little difference. At the very least, Paul was telling Timothy that both overseers and deacons must be the real deal! The qualifications are descriptions of the lifestyle and character of a Christian. And it's the deacons of whom Paul says, "Those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 3:13). They are not "second-string."

Jesus puts each person in place where he wants us (1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 are clear). Each varied responsibility is critical to the health and vitality of Jesus' church. When Paul says, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well" (Romans 16:1), she obviously was no second-string player. She was a faithful servant—for that's what the term "deacon" means! Further, if the seven men chosen to assist the apostles in Acts 6 were the first deacon/leaders, they were to be "men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6:3). Not just having a good reputation and wisdom, but they were men "full of the Spirit." It's not that everyone who shows clear evidence of being full of the Holy Spirit is an overseer. May our deacon/leaders be "full of the Spirit!" I long for the day when every Christian in the church is full of the Holy Spirit and power!

## **Caring for Overseers and Leaders**

Let me say a bit about loving overseers and leaders that serve with us. If not careful, we may be prone to love our structures and systems more than we love people. The structures are only as good as the real relationships that they are meant to enable. Structure is essential, like our skeleton. But structure is dead (just the bones), without the life of love, relationship, and the Holy Spirit (everything else but the bones). The church needs both! Why do you want this person to help you by serving here or there? Do you care about them? What are their gifts? What is God doing with them? How are they doing personally? How is their family? Hopefully you know the answers to these questions. If they are simply a means to our succeeding, we are just using them for our gain. Love means we know them and care for them properly.

I was talking with someone recently who said he rarely talks with the overseers that serve on his board. I told him that I talk with many of my fellow overseers sometimes daily—at least once a week. Updating them, sharing good news, informing them of problems, and talking about our families are all natural things to talk about. Why? I love them. They are my friends. I am their leader. We're giving our lives for Jesus' church together. They are with me. I am intentional about getting my hands on them to pray for them regularly. I also go to them for prayer. How deeply we must love the leaders with whom we serve. Otherwise the people called to serve with us will give up and we will find ourselves alone. If we really love the overseers and leaders that serve with us, they will be loyal. They will protect us. They will pray for us—believe in us—stay with us—suffer with us—persevere with us. We will finish this race together.

## New Leaders

Finding new leaders (generalizing to both overseers and deacon/leaders) in the church is not easy. It takes relationship with newer people. It takes the Holy Spirit's lead. We must understand how a person goes through "testing" like the Bible requires without knowing they're being tested. Sometimes we make these decisions with wishful thinking (i.e., I hope they're going to keep doing better and get their life in better order). Those that have not been thoroughly tested are wild cards. Some will make it—others will break your heart and hurt the church. I've released group leaders before who didn't tithe, thinking that they would "get it eventually." But it's backwards. I've watched them shipwreck their faith, have sex with other people in the church, and blow up their marriages, but I've never seen one who made it. They must be tested FIRST.

So, "How have they been doing?" is our first question. Actions over the past six months to one year are important. Are they committed? Do they consistently show up, like it, go to group, take the Series, serve somewhere, attend team meetings, and tithe? ANY TIME THERE IS A "NO" TO ONE OF THESE—CAUTION! Inviting them into these basics of church life is part of finding out what they're made of (not as a condition for getting to lead—just because they believe it and enjoy it). When they vote "no" by not entering whole heartedly into church life, we know it's either that they are not a Christian, not called to this local church, or not yet mature enough to lead.

Once they are doing all of these things, the question is "who really knows them?" It's not easy to be vulnerable and transparent. Who knows their story and their struggles? It's important. Getting your hands on them to pray is essential. If the Holy Spirit helps them and frees them through your prayer, they will follow you. You will become their spiritual leader. If you tell them "no" and explain why, will they listen? The next question is "does anyone follow them?" It is related to the



question, “are they socially/emotionally healthy?” Also, “are they respected?” “Do they have a good reputation with church people and the people at work or school?” You’ll know if you listen. Watch how people interact with them.

Sometimes we decide to make someone a leader based on their faithfulness and goodness (or longevity and willingness), but forget the winsomeness and abilities that are needed. Many people will be faithful and obedient to Jesus, but are not meant to lead others. The leaders we choose will determine what the next people that stay in the church will look like. If your leaders are odd socially, only odd people will stay. If your leaders are influencers of people day in and day out, they will influence people toward Jesus. If your leaders are respected by socially/emotionally healthy people, you will draw people like them to the church.

Sándor Paull worked in sales before becoming a pastor. He was known by TONS of people in Southern Illinois. I have never heard a single person in the community speak poorly of him. For a guy in sales...that’s impressive! It’s not how good looking or wealthy they are (Sándor and I would have never made it! ;-). But it does have to do with their commitment, character, strength of will, skills/abilities, and how severely they have been damaged by life. Before we planted Vine, the Holy Spirit told us over and over: “I am bringing you the brightest and the best—the cream of the crop.” We need to prayerfully hold out for influencers of the culture; we need to ask our Lord to bring us overseers and leaders on which he can build His church.

## **Church Staff**

The staffs at our churches are made up of pastors who are called to lead the church and support staff who enable them to do that job better. Being a pastor is not a “career choice.” Pastors are pastors because Jesus chooses them to serve Him and His people. Pastors are not employed; they are supported from the tithes and offerings of the church to offer leadership to the people that could not be done while also working another job for forty to fifty hours a week. We know from Ephesians 4:11 that their responsibility is to “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” Too many people think that the job of a pastor is to entertain and please the church. If you think of it like a sports team, they see the pastors as being out on the field playing Christianity while they are in the stands either cheering or booing the pastoral performance. But the image in the Bible is different. The pastor is the coach, training the people to live out their faith in Jesus. The people are on the field, playing the game, and the pastors are on the sidelines, coaching and calling out instruction and direction to the team. The distinction seems simple, but is profound!

### **Pastors**

In many churches, a board hires and fires the lead pastor at will. If the lead pastor says or does something that they don't like, they get rid of him and bring in another. And then, when it comes to other staff pastors, they “hire” them and if they do not produce as hoped, they are fired. For us, the lead pastor is the leader and vision-caster for the whole church. The lead pastor is the lead overseer. The other overseers are gathered around to support the vision that Jesus has given to the man called to lead the church. All of this is done based on relationship! When someone is clearly called to plant a church as the lead pastor, Jesus will bring together other overseers and pastors to help accomplish this mission for Jesus.

So when it comes to adding additional pastors and staff, we don't put an advertisement in the paper or announce to the church "would someone like to interview for this position?" We are constantly looking for the Holy Spirit's lead in who has been chosen by Jesus to meet the needs; who is called to do this? With the approval of the board of overseers, we would then approach the person and ask if they would be willing to take on the responsibility and come on staff. They are almost always "home-grown" followers of Jesus who have been serving faithfully on the mission of this specific local church. By the time someone comes on staff as a pastor, it is almost never a surprise to the church. It usually has become clear that he is called to be a pastor as he has served over time.

When we plant churches, we want the plant to be well enough supported that the lead pastor is on staff full-time from the beginning. Depending on the area and the size of the team, it's also best to have one other full-time staff from the beginning. Sometimes it is another pastor and sometimes the worship leader, depending on their gifts and circumstances. If the lead pastor is very strong in administration, it's not critical that the second staff member is also. However, if he is weaker in administration, the second staff member must be an organizer! So the decision is made based on how the first two staff members complement each other's strengths (and on the Holy Spirit's lead). If the right people or enough finances are not available to bring on a second staff from the beginning, there should be another full-time staff member at least by the time the church reaches 60-80 people (as finances and faith will allow).

In the past, we operated from the assumption that we would bring on one pastor for every 100 people in attendance at the church. However, with the issue of training church planters considered (these being brought on as staff pastors), it may be that we realistically need a pastor for every 60 or 80 people. There must be both long-term staff pastors that stay in the specific local church over a

lifetime and pastors who are church planters and will be sent to start new churches. To continue to reproduce in a healthy manner without losing momentum, there must be enough pastors on staff to sustain the church through giving up pastors, group leaders, and members to start new churches. By the time a church is approaching 400 to 500 people, there should be a solid team of pastors who are deeply loved and trusted by the church.

The lead pastor is responsible for training young and inexperienced pastors. Part of this is theological training. They must have a solid foundation from which to teach and lead. I always assign Wayne Grudem's "Systematic Theology" as reading for them. In addition, I want to know what else they are reading and have a list of recommendations for them. Because we train our pastors "on the job" (i.e., few of our pastors have been to seminary), most of what they will learn is absorbed over time. They are learning how to go to the Bible on all issues of faith and practice as they live out their own relationship with Jesus and as they lead others.

There are other practical issues in which every new pastor needs training. How are decisions made by the staff? How do you use a calendar well to stay organized and to work efficiently? How do you approach a text and structure an outline for preaching/teaching? How do you coach, love, support and train small group leaders and other team leaders? How do you recruit the right people to serve in the right places? How do you have a right balance between doing tasks and leading people? How do you communicate effectively with the people that you lead? What should a meeting with a leader, potential leader, or newcomer look like? How do you budget the finances well for the areas for which you are responsible? How do you effectively cross racial and cultural lines? How do you lead people that are older than you? And on and on. These are not things that you can teach well in a seminar. The lead pastor is constantly watching for "teachable moments" in which to train the

pastors that they lead. Over time they will have plenty of opportunities to train pastors on these and many other relevant issues.

## **Support Staff**

Bringing on additional support staff is always based on need. Someone who can manage the office and inventories is probably of first importance. This cannot just be a nice, friendly person who can answer phones. They must have a high level of administrative ability, being able to coordinate a large number of details and utilize volunteers. Your bookkeeper is likely a volunteer at the beginning, but later, as the job requires six to eight hours a week, you will need to start paying someone part time. The children's director is another priority for support staff. For Blue Sky, we started with one person who was children's director and office manager (two part-time jobs for a small church that, together, made a full-time job). If the children's program is not amazing, you will not add families to the church. Some young pastors think that they want a church of just college students, but they will certainly find that the church is only healthy when it is multigenerational. If for no other reason, they will learn it when they go to pay bills and find that tithe and offerings of the students, while wonderful, will not support a facility and staff. Support staff that will come on later include youth leader, facility coordinator, assistants to the children's director, women's leadership coordinator, and others. As the church gets larger, more and more of these staff specialists will be essential.

## **Leading the Staff**

Each staff member needs to be trained in the details of their specific responsibilities. In addition, the lead pastor needs to have a clear "responsibility map" that shows who does what and who answers to whom (also given to all the staff). At one point in developing Blue Sky's staff, I

realized that we were taking far too long to get anything done and, upon trying to discover the reason why, found that none of the staff knew who was doing what. In addition, there were too many areas of duplicate responsibilities and areas where staff didn't even know something was their responsibility (and thus these were obviously not getting done). All of these things were in their job description in general terms, but it's difficult to keep track of all of the details when juggling so much responsibility. I had a staff planning day with all of our pastors and clearly defined who was doing what. All of the staff having this list of everyone's responsibilities helps resolve problems and gives all staff a reference sheet to look to when wondering "who does this or that."

Staff meeting probably takes place every week at first, but may be every other week as the church gets to eight or ten staff members. During this meeting all of the staff are reviewing the successes and failures of the past week or two and looking ahead to what is coming up. It allows for the coordination of all of the details when you have everyone together. As the church gets larger and there are more support staff, the pastors (or at least some of them) will have regularly-scheduled meetings to talk through things that are not relevant to all of the staff. Both of these contexts allow the lead pastor to also cast vision and do staff training. Topics like core values, using a calendar, communicating with church members, including new people, reading your Bible, leading an effective meeting, etc. are the kinds of issues with which the staff may need help. Lastly, we always worship and pray together in staff meeting. This is a wonderful time to pray for each other and for the Holy Spirit to speak encouragement about the challenges that we face.

The lead pastor is always looking to the health and maturity of the staff that serve with him. The working relationship between staff and the lead pastor is different than in most other work contexts. While it's true that he is their "boss" or leader, there are also wonderful elements of

friendship and deep love for one another. He teaches the staff to care for each other, confess their temptations or sins to one another, and encourages authentic Christian relationships. Early in the life of a church, maybe until it reaches 300 to 400, the lead pastor is really the direct leader to every staff member (some support staff may answer to another pastor early on). He is thinking to the long-term maturity of these men and woman. Thus, he teaches them, corrects them, challenges them, prays for them, and spends time with them.

The lead pastor is their example in faithfulness and, with humility, does not hide his weaknesses from them. He knows when to say, “You don’t need to ask me this...figure it out” and when to sit down with a staff member and carefully lead them through an issue. He should not hesitate to say, “The job that you did was not good enough and this is why” or “What was your thought process in making that decision?” Then he puts his arm around them and speaks courage and faith to them about what Jesus has called them to do and be. My most common question to staff members is, “Why are you doing that yourself? I thought you had leaders and volunteers through which you were supposed to do this?” Most people think is easier to do it themselves, rather than recruit, train, release, and support another person, but remember the job of church leader is to “equip” the church. So the lead pastor is always training pastors and staff in effective Christian leadership.

When the church is larger, probably over 500 or 600 people, the lead pastor will be doing this kind of personal leadership with a group of pastors among the staff who, in turn, lead the rest of the staff. But the lead pastor will always have the responsibility of identifying and training new pastors and potential church planters. While other pastors will help lead these new pastors in some of the details of their responsibilities (e.g., like the small group overseer training a new DC pastor in the details of the job), the lead pastor will be best in transmitting values. Having relationship with him is

critical to their development. So in a larger church, the prominent element of the lead pastor's responsibilities becomes preaching, prayer, vision, pastor development, and finding church planters. This means less detail and more "big picture" responsibilities.



## **Team Meetings**

Monthly Team Meetings are essential to keeping all of your core people moving in the same direction. The meeting will function best when it includes your leaders and “all who serve on a team” at the church. This gives you twelve times a year to train and cast vision for the most committed of the church. If you can keep all of them moving with you, the church will flourish. You can talk to them differently than you do in a Sunday service. You don’t have to constantly talk to both committed disciples and newcomers. You can assume, at least to some degree, that they know you and trust you. You can train them on central issues like leadership, church structure, small groups, inviting, the Holy Spirit, church health, etc.

As with planning your Sunday preaching series in advance, you can plan out six months or a year on what the core of the church needs you to teach them. I frequently spend four to six months on one topic at the Team Meeting to work the Biblical issue deep into the heart of the church. You can address “what’s next” and you can talk to them about problems or challenges that the church faces. It’s a place to share good news about progress made and to encourage everyone who serves. Announce to them all of the upcoming events (baptisms, retreats/conferences, group multiplications, kids program stuff, etc.) and cast vision for them. Update the core on growth and on finances. It is the context to lay your hands on new small group leaders, setting them apart for the task. You will also ordain new pastors at the Team Meeting. Because the Team is made up of those who are committed to the mission of the church, worship can be more intimate and intense. Those who usually are praying for others have an opportunity to receive prayer. The Holy Spirit frequently encourages and builds up the hard-working core of the church. It’s a great place for the Holy Spirit to fill people and impart new spiritual gifts.

Group leaders and kid's workers meet for an hour before the main team meeting begins to receive training/coaching (they are the two specialized groups that need some kind of regular meeting and having this on the same night as your team meeting avoids adding an additional night to their schedule). You must offer a good children's program during the Team Meeting. Feed the people good food to show your appreciation for what they do. I don't think that specific meetings for Sunday morning teams such as greeting, parking, bookstore, etc. are needed. Good leaders can keep these people trained if you have well-developed team leaders and training checklists for them. You don't want people's lives filled with meetings. A Sunday service, small group, and a monthly team meeting is enough for most people. The rest of the time they get to live like they love Jesus among people who don't believe (some of whom are going to come to Jesus through our people's lives and invitations). Don't schedule so much that church meetings become a comfortable substitute for living in our cities as winsome Christians.

Here's how it works at Blue Sky. From 5:00 to 5:45 the children's program workers are meeting with the Kid's Director and the small group leaders and DC pastors are meeting with the pastor who oversees the group system. For both groups of leaders, the meeting involves vision, training, and updates/reminders. Small group leaders are turning in small group reports from the previous month and the group overseer is training on the month's small group topic. Both kid's workers and group leaders also take some time to pray together or for one another. Both meetings finish by 5:45 so they are available to welcome everyone else and socialize for fifteen minutes before the main Team Meeting begins. During these fifteen minutes, the snacks for the night are out and everyone is getting their food so that people can be at their tables and ready to start right at 6 p.m.

The Team Meeting is from 6-8 p.m. We start with worship or announcements (and always have an announcement sheet on the tables so that everyone can get important upcoming dates on their calendars). If announcements are first then I teach at the beginning and worship afterwards. If we worship first then we have announcements afterward followed by teaching and prayer. I usually decide which way to go on the fly right before it starts, based on how things are feeling. Sometimes I want a chance to talk with everyone before we worship, especially if things have been challenging. It gives them a chance to digest truth and to be ready to worship God. I might also talk first for a practical reason...the people who prepared snacks did an amazing feast and people have their plates full of something warm and yummy! It's hard to have them set their food aside and stand to worship. In that case, people eat while I'm talking and we worship later.

The exact times of the meeting or order of the events are not important. We make the decision based on practical considerations of what works best for the people. For instance, we do 6-8 p.m. because we want parents with children to come. Getting little ones to bed closer to "on time" so they stay on schedule and not being so late that school-age children can't get up the next morning is important if you want parents to come. Finishing by 8 p.m. really helps them. The same is true about serving food. We start at dinner time...so we serve pizza for the kids and hearty snacks for the adults so they don't have to rush to eat and feed the kids before they come. It makes people want to be at the Team Meeting. But most importantly, do they experience God's presence and encouragement in the teaching, worship, and prayer? If you want people to come, it needs to be worth their time.

The most frequent question about the Team Meeting that I get from lead pastors is, "How is it different from teaching on a Sunday morning?" In some ways it's similar. Most notably, it is similar in that we teach the Bible! Exposition of specific Bible texts is important to us. We're not just

pulling together a bunch of nice thoughts, doing a devotional, or disconnecting training from the scripture. So we are still reading, explaining, and applying a text from the Bible, chunk by chunk. So how is it different? Let me use an illustration. How are you different when you and your family are having dinner than you are when you have company over? When it's just family, there are some things you don't have to explain every time. Everyone is probably more relaxed. When you have company, you are more concerned about including them and being sure that they understand everything that is being said. The hosts are "on" in a different way than when it's just family.

Teaching a Team Meeting is wonderful. I'm talking to some of my closest friends, new and old. I'm casting vision for why we do what we do and why we believe what we believe as a church. I'm working with the core of the church on the Biblical issues that impact the foundation for the future (e.g., leadership, key beliefs, structure, etc.). While I may teach about any of these topics during a Sunday service, during a Team Meeting I can go faster and speak more directly. I'm not talking to both guests and the family. Just the family! It is clear, plain coaching for the committed core on this mission with Jesus. I may tell stories that are more vulnerable. I may challenge them more strongly, but I always am teaching the Bible itself.

Worship at the Team Meeting is effected by the same issue—just the family. I always tell people, "When you have company over, everyone puts their pants on!" Everyone has underwear, but dad is not allowed to run around the house in his underwear with company over. Worship can be longer and more intimate. I won't allow someone to speak out in tongues at a Sunday service, even with interpretation (takes far too much time to explain well to the friend or family member that someone has been inviting for months that has finally come). I want guests to come back next Sunday and hear more about Jesus. I want our people to invite more friends that do not yet know

Jesus and not always be wondering, “If I invite them, will something very intense happen?” Some of these limits that I’ve set may be very different in a time of great outpouring of the Holy Spirit—in a time of true revival. But in the current spiritual context, I think it’s too much for guests to work through up front.

However, at the Team Meeting tongues and interpretation is an appropriate and faith-building part of our worship. Yes, people who are newer to serving may be stretched and wonder what is happening, but because they are committed and have had time to develop safe relationships, they will be okay as long as you give clear, Biblical explanations of what is happening. I almost always give a brief explanation after something like this at a Team Meeting. It gives me a chance to train the core on these issues as the people grow in maturity. There may also be prophetic words to the team and I encourage our most trusted leaders with a prophetic gift to share these. I don’t open it up for anyone to speak, however. Small groups and daily relationship is the best place for an inexperienced person to grow in such gifts. In the larger group context, I want the people who are mature enough to model for everyone else how it works to be prophesying. I’m not trying to set up an “only special people can do this” culture with spiritual gifts, but I am concerned that those speaking out actually model the real thing in a style that is most encouraging and instructive. The same thinking applies to corporate prayer. We may engage in large-group prayer at the Team Meeting, but I wouldn’t use an “open mic” approach. I would get our most mature leaders in prayer to come up and lead the rest of the team in prayer, while everyone agrees together. Again, this allows for modeling our values on these important Christian practices.

One more thing about the Team Meeting worship: I ask our worship leader to use this context to introduce new songs (one each month). This allows us to see how it feels in our context of

corporate worship. Sometimes a song sounds amazing on the recording and moves me when I hear it. But when we try it, it's either too "big" for us or there is not much sense of the Holy Spirit's presence when we sing it. It feels like a dud. Introducing these at the Team Meeting gives the worship leader and lead pastor a chance to see how it feels BEFORE we introduce it on Sunday. On the other hand, if the song really works well, by using it at the Team Meeting first the core of the church learns the song before introducing it Sunday morning. Then when we sing the song for the first time on Sunday, a good portion of the people know it and the worship experience is more engaging.

The Team Meeting is one of my favorite experiences in church life. I have twelve times a year to speak to the core of the church about what we are doing and why. It is a time of vision casting and value setting. As the lead pastor, I use the meeting to correct our course where we've gotten a bit off track. We get to experience the Holy Spirit's power and presence together as a church family. The worship of our Lord is intimate and renewing. Prayer flows freely and those that spend long hours serving are refreshed. I use the time to help identify upcoming leaders as I meet people that are new to serving whom I've only seen in the Sunday service. It's not an afterthought or a last minute Sunday afternoon prep. It is a critical context of leadership and training for the church. What gets built into the people at the Team Meeting will work its way into the rest of the church as the whole church grows and matures together.

## Membership Series

The purpose of our Series is to orient new friends to the church. We want people to understand what we believe and how to participate effectively as a member of the local church. We want to weed out anyone who will resist orthodox biblical doctrine (e.g., Jesus is the one way, hell is real, overseers are men, etc.) or on issues of church practice (e.g., small group life, serving, tithing, worship style, etc). We have the opportunity to teach the Bible and win the hearts of those who are willing to go with us and, at the same time, to help others discover that the church is not a good fit for them. We don't want to be combative or push people on Bible issues before they are ready, but we do want to guard the unity of the local church.

We must be careful to keep the front door and back door from being too close together. It takes time for people to learn and change their thinking. If we hit them in the face with all the "hard stuff" without giving them time to build some relationship and trust us, we will never have a chance to teach them to follow Jesus and hold to Biblical Christianity. Think of it another way: You can only swallow one mouthful at a time. We want to give people manageable bites of the Bible so that they have the best chance at growing into an authentic follower of Jesus. We guard the unity of the church by teaching people clearly what we believe and how we practice it. But we do this with "gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience" (1 Peter 3:15) so that we may win as many as possible.

We have set up the Series so that it requires a significant commitment of time and energy to complete. We don't want people to be able to "become a member in a day." It's like getting married the first day you meet a person; when the infatuation wears off, you may find you don't want to be

with this person at all. I see the four months that it takes to complete the Series as a dating period. They are getting to know us and we are getting to know them. The question at the forefront of my mind is: “Will this relationship work?” At the same time, we don’t want to make the process too intense so that it’s extremely difficult for most people to complete. Four sessions that are two hours each (one offered each month) taken over a period of 4-8 months (depending on the individual’s availability on the scheduled dates) requires a significant commitment without being overly burdensome. Those who complete the Series may make a membership commitment.

The content of our Series is designed to walk people through our beliefs, getting free and becoming mature, developing a life of service, and living as a committed member in the local church (titled “Beliefs,” “Freedom,” “Serving,” and “Community”). Understand that there is no way that we can give them everything that they will need on their journey as a follower of Jesus; we are simply trying to get them started well. The content of the Series must be firmly Biblical, communicate our values, and help people understand how to navigate the church. It also must meet our standard of “replicable” (that is we can use it confidently in all of our churches without each pastor having to “redesign” the material to work effectively in his context). Those who commit in the church will get the rest of what they need from ongoing Biblical preaching, applying the Bible in the relational context of small group, personal Bible study, and the Holy Spirit’s work over time. In addition, we give everyone who makes a commitment to membership a copy of Wayne Grudem’s “Systematic Theology.” It’s essential that our members have clear, Biblical doctrine. We give them “Systematic Theology” as a resource to help them as they mature over the years.

The quality of the learning experience in the Series is essential to winning new disciples to the church’s mission. Getting into the church is a process for everyone. We’ve structured the church so



that it's as easy as possible to get involved. Sunday service, Series, Small Group, Serving, and Team Meeting is the typical order of involvement for most people. Not everyone follows this exact order, but there is a progression to our thinking. The commitment required is in proportion to the healthy relationships a person is developing. If we ask a person to serve before they have the safety of relationships in small group, we are likely doing them harm (when something doesn't go well, they don't have enough relationship to work it through and will generally just disappear from the church). If they won't take the time to attend the Series on Sunday afternoons, they likely will never truly make a commitment to be helpful to the mission of the church. So, taking the Series is a kind of "seriously checking out this church" for many people. If their experience at the Series is interesting, informative, and worth their time, we will likely win them to Jesus and the church. If it is boring and poorly done, many of them will choose not to come back.

The most important issue is the pastor teaching the Series. As the lead pastor, I currently teach two of the four sessions. At the beginning, I taught all four sessions. It was important for me to do so until such a time when we had other key pastors who had developed in their teaching ability to where they could do it very well. This takes time in a new church. It is also important that the lead pastor teach all four sessions in the beginning because they need to understand the sessions and what we are trying to teach newcomers. With that understanding, they can then teach other pastors what we are doing and why. It is hard to teach for two hours straight! The pastor must really understand the notes, have prepared application stories thoroughly, and believe the Bible texts being taught. While we all use the same manuals for the Series as a Network, the pastor must own the notes. He must prayerfully prepare and be sure that he understands the logic and structure of the training. People ought to experience the Holy Spirit's presence as clear, Biblical theology of the local

church is unfolded. And this usually has to be done AFTER teaching a Sunday service or two (or three in some cases). Somehow we must see the Series as a wonderful and essential opportunity to talk with newcomers about what we are doing together and as a chance to invite them into the purpose of Jesus' church.

One more thing: As with anything, people's first impression is important. In the Series, we are not just telling people what kind of church we are...we are showing them! It should be well organized and well executed. The lead pastor cannot do this part! Another staff member or volunteer needs to be responsible for getting everything ready. Tables need to be set up; childcare ready to go; signage in place; water, pens, Bibles, sign-in slips all on the tables; music on; lighting and heat/ac set properly; manuals copied and ready; "Systematic Theology" books ready for a pastor to hand out to those who turn in membership forms. It's a lot of work!

At Blue Sky we serve pizza fifteen minutes before the Series begins (so pizza must be there, plates/napkins out, etc.). We do this because we found that, for many people, the hassle of going out to lunch and coming back to the building was difficult. If lunch took longer than expected, they just didn't come back. So we changed our approach. Our second service ends at 12:30 or so. We start serving pizza at 12:45 for those signed up and the Series begins at 1:00 p.m. (and ends at 3:00). If circumstances change, we will change the specific details. But you get the idea. You have to make it worth the newcomer's time. It must be a good experience. You have to think through the challenges that they face in taking the Series. You want them to say afterwards "That was so helpful!!"

## Retreats and Conferences

We do retreats and conferences to help build up the disciples in the church, giving them a more intensive time to seek Jesus and to strengthen relationships with each other. Both retreats and conferences have a very similar purpose. For retreats, we stay out of town at a camp or retreat center together. Conferences are held at the local church building for a couple of days and the people all stay in their own homes. Obviously retreats will have a more profound impact on the people because of the extended time together and because being out of normal home routines allows for fewer distractions. However, conferences can be especially helpful in getting newer people at the church to go further in their commitments. Because it doesn't require them to stay away from home and, thus, does not feel as intimidating to first timers, more people are willing to commit to a conference (and it's usually less expensive because you're not paying for food and overnight accommodations). Both have benefits and you need to consider how the church is doing and what would be most beneficial to people.

All of us are way too busy and live under too much pressure to really have a healthy, vibrant spiritual life. The nature of real relationship with Jesus requires us to slow down in worship, prayer, and immersing ourselves in the Bible. While we don't want to over-schedule our church life, I've found that doing an all-church retreat each year to be essential. At Blue Sky, we do ours in the fall so that it's a good distance from the Network Summer Conference. Doing one in the spring is too close for people to afford the cost and to schedule their calendars for both. The Network Summer Conference and a local retreat provide two major retreat/conference experiences each year. By having them spread out, each one offers a "next step" of devotion for newer people that are beginning

to make a commitment at the church. When a small group leader can get new members to attend these events, it almost always solidifies their devotion to Jesus and relationships with people.

Our retreats are scheduled so that it requires everyone to take one day off work or school. We start on Thursday evening and end on Saturday by noon. Friday night to Saturday evening is just too short (although it can work well for a local conference). The plan is to do four sessions during the retreat with extended worship, Bible training on a relevant theme, and lots of prayer. The time between sessions, with meals, some activities, and free time, allows people to relax and connect with each other. So don't overbook the schedule.

I frequently want to have another pastor from the network in to speak at a retreat or local conference. It allows our people to feel a part of the larger vision of what we are doing together and these pastors bring gifts and perspectives that compliment what I am able to do. But at least one out of every three years, I want to do the retreat myself. It is wonderful for a lead pastor to have four sessions over three days to talk with many of his most committed people about the mission that we are on (just be sure that you are not also scheduled on Sunday). There is a freedom from time restraints that gives the opportunity to challenge them and thoroughly train them. It also allows me to push their limits in experiencing the Holy Spirit's presence and power. So use the benefits of having other pastors in and be aware that there are times when you should do the sessions yourself.

Whoever is coordinating the retreat must be exceptional at detail. For people to have a good experience, communication ahead of time and during the retreat must be very clear. We are helping people know what to expect and helping them avoid frustrating situations (like getting lost because of bad directions or being late because of not knowing how long it would take to drive there). Nothing

is worse than showing up and finding out you will be sharing a room with ten snoring men when you thought you and your wife would be sleeping together in a private room. And many people will want to plan what to do during free time. For some, socializing doesn't come as easily and these people will often want to leave if there is uncomfortable or lonely down time. You have to communicate options and help people to connect with others.

Registration forms should be available at your Team Meeting at least two months in advance of the retreat or conference. People have busy lives and busy schedules. Many young people can do "last minute" well, but more mature people and parents with children often need to plan many months in advance. We have the dates for upcoming retreats scheduled and announced six or more months before a retreat date. If you want people to come, you have to be respectful of the challenges that they face; knowing the dates long in advance helps them to plan.

Because we are planting multi-ethnic and multi-generational churches, we must think about how what we do impacts different people. A couple of years ago, I found out that many of our Asians were not coming to the retreats because they did not know who to room with and some even said that they were not sure they could do without eating good rice for three days! We had to personally invite them and help in making arrangements for housing. We also have to deal with the cultural food issue. During the first night, we hired a portable Thai restaurant to drive to the retreat center and serve dinner for \$5 a plate (everyone was appreciative that they didn't have to rush to get dinner after work or school before coming to the retreat). We also got permission to have our own rice cookers and Asian toppings for rice at each meal. We were just trying to help them feel like they could connect. And I might add, if the food is awful, no one will want to come back to another

retreat. We decided to no longer use the most convenient retreat center for Blue Sky because their food was inedible!

Further, if you want married couples and people over thirty to attend the retreat, you must think carefully about sleeping accommodations. Many college students and singles in their twenties care very little about where they sleep; as long as you give them a bed and a shower, they are happy. But older people are not use to sleeping in “strange” places. They don’t like sleeping away from their spouse and they don’t like college-style communal showers. Also, choruses of snoring all night are not their idea of fun; it will ruin the entire retreat for them (and you will probably not get them back again). So be sure that you get a retreat center where those who need more private rooms and their own showers can have them. They are always willing to pay more to have this comfort, so simply make arrangements on your registration form for people to choose the sleeping arrangements they prefer at different rates. Also, be sure parents know to make their own arrangements at home for their children long before the retreat date. It is not easy to do, but the retreat experience will make them better parents so encourage them to find a way.

The only retreat event that we do during the rest of the year is a retreat for small group leaders and spouses. It’s in February, so that it is not too close to the summer conference. For this retreat, the local church pays for the entire cost as a support and encouragement of our leaders. It is a time of training and refreshing and I frequently have someone from the network in to do the teaching (although every few years I want to do it myself). Again, plan well and communicate with them far in advance. Have great registration forms that help them to know the details and get them excited about what is going to happen. Make it feel like you are so appreciative of what they do as group leaders and that the pastors want to serve them in this way. Do fun activities that help to build unity

and friendship among them. Give them time for a nap and a walk (or a game of basketball). And be sure that they get tons of hands-on prayer. Usually they are praying for others, so a weekend of refreshing together and experiencing God's power and presence is very important for them.

You must know the reason "WHY" you are doing a retreat. What do you hope for Jesus to do in the people? What will it take to create the environment where this can happen? These experiences of retreating together help solidify the foundation of the church like nothing else can and give the Holy Spirit a context to move on His people with life-changing power.

## **Church Finances**

When we first planted Vine Church, we had no money, no people, no jobs, and not a lot of hope by human standards. But we believed that we were to exercise faith and live out generosity. The first check ever written out of Vine's checking account was \$2,500 to another church plant. Why? Because we felt that Jesus said to. We are Christians. We don't rely on the size of the church bank account, and we don't play it safe. Risk, obedience, and love are to motivate us in decisions when it comes to money.

Jesus was clear that we are not to love money: "You cannot serve both God and money" (Matthew 5:24). Paul's direction to young Timothy is the same: "As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share" (1 Timothy 6:17-18). There it is! That's our view of money. We don't look to the bank account for safety; we look to Jesus. The overseers responsible for managing the finances of the churches know that we are to be "generous and ready to share." When Jesus returns, I pray that there is very little money in any of the church accounts. I pray that all of it has been spent to bring people to Jesus and make authentic disciples for Him.

So, what are some of the basic principles that guide our decisions regarding finances? First, we believe that the local church is Jesus' vehicle for disciple making and spreading the good news about Him. We spend money to build up the local church and to plant new churches. We're not much into para-church organizations. While many of them do good work, we believe that Jesus' work ought to be carried out primarily through healthy local churches. We do at times support local



campus ministries, because we love the people trying to reach college students and because we feel compassion for them with the pressure that they are under to “raise funds” (just being honest).

Second, we don’t believe in “fund raising.” The Biblical model is not car washes and bake sales. It is faithfulness and generosity on the part of those who love God. When disciples are reliable in their tithes and offerings in their local church, the church will have everything needed to accomplish the mission. It is obedience, and it is joy! What a privilege to be able to participate in the cause of Jesus’ church by giving our resources. So rather than fund raising, we believe in giving!

Third, we spend based on need. What is needed to carry out the vision that Jesus has given to us? What will it take to obey all that he asks us to do? Ultimately it all boils down to more and healthier disciples (i.e., worshipers) and new churches (so that there will be more and healthier disciples). So when it’s time to spend money, we ask “does this forward Jesus’ mission through the local church?” We ask this when we bring on a new staff member, lease or purchase a facility, give money to help a church plant, or purchase a new amp for the sound system.

Lastly, we spend money in obedience to Jesus. It’s all His, and he gives real direction on using resources. This means that we frequently must take faith-risks when handling the church finances. More times than not, we didn’t have the money to do what we, as overseers, believed Jesus wanted us to do. New staff, new facilities, giving \$30,000 to a church plant, helping the poor...it’s all the same. But we did it anyway, trusting that he would provide. We spend money in obedience, believing Jesus takes care of His church. It’s not in foolishness. That is, we do plan, budget, analyze, and use wisdom (we will get to this in a minute). But God help us if we ever move church finances

to the realm of business. We are not a business with the goal of making a profit and accumulating wealth. We risk everything to obey Jesus.

## **Budgeting**

Budgeting is important in managing the church finances responsibly and we budget based on need. The budget is a guide to help us estimate what it will take to carry out the mission this year and we estimate (based on growth trends and past experience) how much the church will give to meet this need. Knowing the giving “per person per week” averages is helpful in planning. In smaller university cities, this number may be around \$25 per person per week. In a larger urban area (largely because of better employment and more professional people), it may be between \$40 and \$45. Understand that both of these numbers are low; if every believer in the church was actually giving at least ten percent of their gross income, the numbers would be much higher. Regardless, knowing the actual number helps us to budget based on average attendance.

If you know your average attendance during the last three months of the current year and how much growth this number represents over the prior year (for the same time period), you can then estimate giving next year. Let me give an example. If average attendance during the last three months of the year was 300 people per week (including kids, youth, and adults) and giving per person per week was \$25, your actually giving was \$7,500 per week. There are thirteen weeks in a quarter (3 months). By multiplying \$7,500 by 13 weeks, we know that total giving during fourth quarter was \$97,500. Assuming that there was nothing unusual about giving during the last quarter (giving campaigns for facilities, large offerings, etc.), you can assume that you will start next year with giving being around \$97,500 for the first quarter (you are not planning on it going down, right?).

Now, let's assume that you had a 20% growth rate during the last quarter over the previous year's last quarter (previous year's average was 250 and this year's average was 300...20% growth. For all you math experts, you compute this by as follows:  $300 - 250 = 50/250 = .20$  or 20%). If there is no reason to believe that your growth rate will go down during the coming year, you can estimate that by the fourth quarter of the year you will again have a 20% growth and 360 people attending (current average attendance of 300 times 1.2 equals 360). Now, here is where all of this has been leading. If your giving per person per week of \$25 stays consistent, your giving budget may look like this:

1<sup>st</sup> Half of the Year:  $330 \text{ people} \times \$25 = \$8,250/\text{week} \times 26 \text{ weeks} = \$214,500$  1<sup>st</sup> Half Giving

2<sup>nd</sup> Half of the Year:  $360 \text{ people} \times \$25 = \$9,000/\text{week} \times 26 \text{ weeks} = \$234,000$  2<sup>nd</sup> Half Giving

Total Annual Giving:  $\$214,500 + \$234,000 = \$448,500$

This simple computation just allows you to estimate, based on recent numbers and trends, how much will be available to spend. I generally do not include offerings in these computations. Just tithes. Offerings then allow a kind of cushion to the annual budget and provide for the unexpected. If you want to be more conservative, because you're not confident about the growth percentage during the coming year, you simply use a lower percentage for budgeting (you might budget based on a 15% growth rate even though you had 20% during the previous year).

Spending budgets then follow the giving estimates. When you have an idea of what giving will be, you can decide how to use the resources faithfully. Again, this is based on need for the mission. A couple of general rules will help. We plan on spending around 25% on facility and 50%

on staff (the actual numbers that we have always used are 26% and 52%...but I'm not sure why ;-). Over the years, these numbers have proven to be a helpful guide for planning. If staff spending is already at 60%, you may have to delay adding another person. Or if the new potential lease will require you to spend 50% of the total budget on facility, you probably will not have enough resources to staff the church adequately. But they are just guidelines. At times, facility spending may be as high as 30% or more for a period and staff may fluctuate between 40% and 60%.

Another factor that will impact the percentage spent on staff is the annual Christmas Offering (or Thanksgiving Offering for some). At Blue Sky we do an annual Christmas Offering that is used for expanding new areas as the church grows in the coming year. This allows us to do things that we couldn't normally do, like bring on an additional pastor to start a new DC. The use of a Christmas offering to expand staff may put the immediate percentages over the target of around 50%, knowing that it will balance out after the church has had the benefit of the new pastor for the first year (i.e., his leadership will produce additional growth which will result in additional giving and, thus, he will usually "pay for himself" within about a year). So while the percentage spent on staff is increased during that first year, the resources to support the staff member is coming from money set aside from the Christmas Offering, instead of from on-going tithes.

The other line items in a budget make up the remaining 25% of the total and include everything from children's program, to retreats, to Sunday service supplies. Again, you estimate the coming year's need based on how much was actually needed during the previous year, plus allowance for growth in the area. If attendance has increased 20% and Sunday service supplies—including coffee, cups, donuts, etc.—required \$10,000 last year, you can estimate that you will spend

around \$12,000 in the coming year ( $\$10,000 \times 1.20 = \$12,000$ ). After a few years of doing this, you will get a good feel for how to estimate the need.

## **Reserves**

Sometimes pastors ask me, “How much should we have in reserves?” And I usually answer, “Probably more than you have!” Because we function based on trust in Jesus, we are not big on saving lots of money in the account. However, you need to have a good reserve. Three months average expenses held back in a reserve account is great. With the example given above having an annual budget of \$448,500, your reserve would ideally run around \$100,000 ( $\$448,500/4$  quarters = 112,125 or three month’s total giving). But most of the churches in our network don’t have that much. For church plants, I would like to see the reserve not drop below \$40,000 or \$50,000. At times, the churches that I have led have had reserves get below \$10,000 and, I assure you, it makes the lead pastor lay awake at night and pray! But sometimes Jesus allows close calls with the finances to be certain that our trust is in Him and not in the bank account.

The reserve is to be used, however. It is there to safeguard the church finances during low giving months or high spending months. In addition, at times the overseers will decide to commit reserves to take a necessary risk like bringing on an additional pastor. I remember many times when, although our finances were not particularly great, there was another church in a tough circumstance and we would take a chunk of our reserve and give it to them. We’re not just trying to protect ourselves or play it safe. The reserve is to back-up the ongoing giving of the local church and to bring glory to Jesus in whatever he asks! Remember, we risk in faith to obey Jesus; whatever he asks, he gets! We trust Him.

## **Filled with the Holy Spirit**

Our history as a network of churches has given us a wonderful foundation of Holy Spirit experience and Biblical theology. Many of the excesses and misuses in some Charismatic and Pentecostal groups regarding the Holy Spirit were corrected by leaders who have gone before us. But this has not been without some of our own misunderstandings and imbalances. We are a group of non-denominational, evangelical Christian churches. We are Christians who believe the Bible. I write this in hopes that we would be true to the text of the Bible with our beliefs and practice regarding the Holy Spirit. We do not want to be churches with technically correct doctrine and no experience of God's power as recorded in the Bible. At the same time, we do not value spiritual experience above clear, Biblical doctrine. We want both; we want Spirit and Truth.

As Christians, we are desperately dependent on the Holy Spirit. But for most people, both our Biblical understanding and our personal experiences about and with the Holy Spirit are immature. Some, because of their lack of first-hand experience, force interpretations onto the texts that explain away their lack of real experience with the Holy Spirit in a comfortable way. Others are so into spiritual experiences of the Holy Spirit that they neglect clear and comprehensive doctrine on the person of the Holy Spirit and His function in the church. We want both good doctrine and real experience. After all, he is God the Spirit. He is not an addition to Christianity or an option for Christians. As with all issue of belief and practice, we must turn to the Bible to find both our belief and our practice.

## **A Bible Overview on the Holy Spirit**

In all four of the Gospels, John the Baptist said about Jesus: “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Luke 3:16). Jesus is the one who baptizes with fire...the Holy Spirit. He talked about this a number of times during the three years of His ministry. John 7:37-39 says, “On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out...” (v. 37a). Can you picture the scene? Crowds of people and Jesus calls out in a loud voice with great passion: “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’” (v. 37b-38). We thirst and ache and cry out for Jesus! Oh, to be with Him and enjoy the beauty of His presence! What a promise! Then John, by the unction of the Holy Spirit Himself, explains: “Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (v. 39). Living water...the same living water about which He spoke with the woman at the well in John 4. The Holy Spirit would fulfill our longing and glorify Jesus.

Then in John 14 through 16 he explains even more, just before His death and resurrection. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:15-18). The Spirit of Truth...the Holy Spirit...the Helper. The same Spirit that had descended on Jesus at His baptism. The Spirit that led Him into the desert to be tempted and overcome the evil one. The One in whom Jesus returned from the desert “in the power of the Spirit” (Luke 4:14). The Holy Spirit prophesied to be on Jesus

when he read in the synagogue “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18a); the One through whom Jesus preached good news, healed the sick, cast out demons, calmed storms, and even raised the dead. This same Holy Spirit, Jesus said, was WITH the disciples and was going to be IN them!

Now Jesus was going away and, yet, He was not abandoning His disciples; they would not be orphans because He would come to them by the Holy Spirit. More than not just leaving them as orphans, Jesus told them, “It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7). It’s hard to imagine that having the Holy Spirit would be better than having Jesus stay! But it’s true. “To your advantage.” The Holy Spirit in us. Glorifying Jesus. Empowering us to obey Him. Keeping us in His truth. Jesus said, “He will glorify me” (John 16:14). Wonderful!

In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit would from time to time “come upon” a prophet or king for a special purpose and in a dramatic way. But it was only for a few select people. But the prophet Joel had foretold the event that Jesus was talking about...the day when the Holy Spirit would be like living water flowing from within His disciples: “And it shall come to pass afterwards, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit” (Joel 2:28-29). It was a prophecy of widespread outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Not just a few special people called to be prophets, but all of His disciples. And the Apostle Peter confirms that this was indeed about the sending of the Holy Spirit that Jesus had told about (Acts 2:17-18), by quoting Joel’s prophecy as an explanation of the Pentecost outpouring.



In Acts 1, after He has been crucified and raised from death, Jesus commands the disciples, “not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father” (Acts 1:4). The great commission had been given: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). But not yet! You need the Holy Spirit’s empowerment! Just like Jesus did not start ministering before the Holy Spirit descended on Him at His baptism, the disciples were not yet to start being witnesses to the death and resurrection of Jesus. They’ve seen and heard it all. They know the facts (although some things were not yet completely clear to them). Now they needed the Holy Spirit’s power. It was impossible for them to obey Jesus’ commands without the Helper. So Jesus goes all the way back to the beginning three years prior and says: “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1:5). And Jesus ascends to the Father.

So the disciples waited and prayed for ten days or so. “When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:1-4). I doubt they knew what to expect. But when it happened it was so real; spiritual reality crashed into physical reality. They hear “sound like a mighty rushing wind.” Loud, intense, maybe terrifying! They saw fire rest on each of them? With their eyes!

They experienced the Holy Spirit powerfully. It wasn’t some quiet, hardly noticed event; it was loud and visible with real results. They began speaking in languages that they did not know. They were filled with such boldness and assurance that Peter begins to preach to the crowd that gathers. Just the fact that it was dramatic enough to draw a crowd tells us much about this

outpouring! Imagine what it must have been like. The empowerment of the Holy Spirit is not some subtle or undiscerned event. The persons who received the Holy Spirit and those around them knew something dramatic had occurred. There was evidence that it had indeed happened. Those involved were radically changed and Jesus was glorified. Just reading the lifestyle of the 3,000 who were regenerated on that day is evidence enough (Acts 2:42-47). Now consumed with learning the truth of Jesus, relationships with each other, prayer, awe of God's power, extreme generosity, meeting together daily, joy, praising God, favor with people, and new friends also coming to Jesus, to name just a few. They were completely different. New men and women!

You also can't help but notice the change in the apostles. Earlier they were scared, confused, and hiding. They still didn't seem to understand the reasons for all that Jesus had said and done, when they asked in Acts 1:6 "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" But now, after being baptized with the Holy Spirit, Peter is bold in his preaching. The truth about Jesus' words and actions seem to have all come together in the coming of the Spirit of Truth, as Jesus called Him. All of the apostles were doing "many wonders and signs" (Acts 2:42). And they just keep going.

Peter and John heal a man that had never walked (Acts 3). The dear man has a hard time keeping it quiet and is jumping and leaping and, apparently, shouting as he hangs onto Peter and John in the temple. Again, a crowd gathers and Peter preaches the same thing: Jesus crucified, repentance, forgiveness of sins, Jesus raised from the dead. "The faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all" (Acts 3:16b). Where is their fear or hiding or confusion? An additional 2,000 or so people are saved as Peter speaks to them the truth. Only the Holy Spirit can do such things through ordinary people. Such astounding happenings are the work of God the Spirit. We can't make such things happen. Even the Jewish religious council who arrested

Peter and John immediately knew this! They knew that men cannot do such things, so they asked, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” And once again, “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 4:7), Peter speaks to them and proclaims the same message again.

I love the response: “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). That’s right! We can’t do this kind of thing. The religious leaders knew that they couldn’t do it. They couldn’t deny that it had happened. Normal guys who had been with Jesus. Amazing! Men full of the Holy Spirit. Baptized with the same Spirit in whom Jesus was baptized.

So after being threatened, Peter and John are released and go immediately to their Christian friends to pray! Why? They needed God’s power and help. The same religious leaders had recently killed Jesus. Maybe they were not scared, being so filled with the Holy Spirit, but I would have been. At a minimum they knew of their great need. How do I know? They were asking God to give them boldness to continue: “And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (Acts 4:29-30). They had recently been baptized with the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 and now as they are following Jesus in this amazing adventure, they need more help. And graciously, the Holy Spirit fills them again: “And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31). It appears as if, in their weakness, they were in danger of losing their courage. Why else would they be asking for such help? And the Holy Spirit fills them with more. And if we had been there to witness it, would

we have missed it or thought it a “very nice prayer”? I don’t think so. The very house was shaken with the power of God. The people were probably shaken too. Empowerment with the Holy Spirit in all of the accounts in the Book of Acts are so real and powerful that both the people being filled and those around them have clear evidence that something wonderful has happened.

Acts chapters 5-7 are filled with terrifying and amazing acts of God and with horrifying persecutions, with the stoning of Stephen (no wonder they needed such empowerment for boldness). Then in Acts 8, because of the persecution that forced most of the Christians out of Jerusalem, a man named Philip (one of the seven chosen to assist the apostles in Acts 6:5) goes to Samaria “and proclaimed to them the Christ” (Acts 8:5). Clearly empowered by the Holy Spirit, he teaches with power and authority, kicks out unclean spirits, and heals many people. The account reads, “When they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women” (Acts 8:12). They were saved. Regenerated. Made new. Repentant and forgiven. Born again, adopted—the whole deal! EXCEPT, they had not received the Holy Spirit.

I’ve always been taught that this was because they were Samaritans and, being outcasts from the Jews, God gave them their own little Pentecost so that they would know that they were not second class Christians. Everyone else receives the Holy Spirit’s baptism upon conversion. When teaching this myself, I would use the argument “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3b). It is true that regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit. But, back to Acts 8, I now see that there is only one problem with the “Samaritan Pentecost” interpretation of these events: The text does not say so. There is absolutely no indication or hint that these Christians received the Holy Spirit separately from the Holy Spirit’s work of regeneration because they were Samaritans.

The explanation given in the text itself is quite simple: “Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:14-17). They were genuinely saved; they had believed and were baptized with water. But “the Holy Spirit... had not yet fallen on any of them” (Acts 8:16). It was not simultaneous; there was a delay in time of however many days or weeks it took for the apostles to hear the news, travel to Samaria, and lay their hands on them. The explanation in the text is simply that the Holy Spirit had not yet fallen on them. But what about the other occurrences in Acts?

In Acts 9, Saul is converted through the dramatic appearing of Jesus to him in a flash of brilliant light. Jesus speaks to him and sets him right. Blinded Saul is undoubtedly born again, to use Jesus’ words, in the encounter with the risen Lord. Saul is obviously repentant, praying and fasting for three days. And when Ananias comes, there is no need to preach Jesus crucified and risen to Saul; he appears to already believe this. Ananias just comes into the house that he was directed to and says, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 9:17b). He didn’t need to preach Jesus to him for Saul was apparently already saved. Ananias just heals his eyes and prays for the Holy Spirit to fall on him. For Saul, being baptized with the Holy Spirit happened about three days after he had believed. It’s amazing that “immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God’....proving that Jesus was the Christ” (Acts 9:20; 22). How could he

do this so quickly and powerfully? The Spirit of Truth had been sent to fill Saul three days after Jesus had saved him.

Then next account is found with Cornelius in Acts 10. Peter has been shown in a vision that Jesus is about to bring the Gentiles into the Christian church. Cornelius, having seen an angel, sends for Peter to hear whatever he has to say (as the angel had told him). Peter, having been prepared by his own vision, willingly goes to Cornelius' house. When he arrives, Cornelius has all of his friends and family waiting—a house full! Peter preaches to them the same thing he always preaches: Jesus crucified and risen from the dead. “He is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:42-43). It's the clear Christian message once again. But then what Peter never expected occurs! “While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God” (Acts 10:44-46). This time being baptized with the Holy Spirit appears to be simultaneous with regeneration, or at least very close together. They believed and the Holy Spirit fell on them apparently all at once. But it wasn't an uncertain thing; the Holy Spirit filling wasn't something hidden. It was obvious, “For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God” (v. 46), just like it had happened with them at Pentecost. There was clear evidence that they had been baptized with the Holy Spirit—they all knew. So Peter tells them to be baptized with water also.

The final account is found in Acts 19 with Paul visiting Ephesus. He finds some “disciples” there that don't appear to yet be disciples of Jesus. For when Paul questions them about whether or

not they have received the Holy Spirit when they believed, they didn't even know that there was a Holy Spirit. When further questioned, he learns that they had just received John's baptism. He then tells them: "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus" (Acts 19:4). It appears that they had not yet believed Jesus; they had not been saved. But then as soon as Paul tells them this, they believe Jesus and "they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus" (v. 5). Now...at least for a few minutes, they had believed but had not yet been baptized with the Holy Spirit (it would not have taken too long to baptize them because there were only twelve men). We know this because "when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying" (v. 6). Again, they were baptized with the Holy Spirit after being saved; there is a delay.

### **A Few Conclusions**

Let me summarize. It appears hard to actually make a case that everyone who believes has been baptized with the Holy Spirit. It seems to me that this theology has developed out of the genuine desire to keep those who are authentic Christians (really saved) from feeling badly because there may be more to the Christian experience than they have yet experienced. Undoubtedly times of dullness in the church where there is very little apparent power of the Holy Spirit being poured out leads Christians to teach such things. But when I look at the actual texts, the experiences are varied. Some received the Holy Spirit's baptism sometime after being regenerated, even if it was a short time (Acts 2, Acts 8, Acts 9, Acts 19). Others appear to have received the baptism of the Holy Spirit at the same time as salvation, or at least VERY close together (Acts 10). It seems that the only reasonable interpretation of these experiences in the early church is to conclude that Jesus baptizes people with the Holy Spirit when he chooses. We can't make it happen; we can only pray for such grace.

Also, the Biblical accounts of people being baptized with the Holy Spirit all include obvious evidence that it has indeed happened. Dramatic changes in the individuals occur (boldness in Saul and Peter, speaking in tongues, great assurance in belonging to Jesus, signs and wonders, etc.). After studying the Book of Acts, the idea that someone would be baptized with the Holy Spirit and not know about it seems unlikely. It seems that even the people around them would know and witness clear evidence that such an outpouring has occurred. To say, "If you believe in Jesus you have been baptized in the Holy Spirit" even if no such evidence exists, appears to go against all Biblical accounts. I have taught such things myself in the past and now realize that the most grievous impact is to cause genuine Christians to expect nothing more than they have already received! I have sinned against them and against the Holy Spirit by teaching such things (though I now know I was wrong, I did it actually believing what I was teaching). If Christians in this very dark and unbelieving age, when the church is floundering, continue in such a powerless state, we are in serious trouble. How we need the empowerment of the Holy Spirit! Oh, that Christians would pray for Jesus to send the Holy Spirit in the church and the Christians on the face of the earth would wake up in His power.

### **Evidences of the Holy Spirit's Baptism**

In January of 2011, as we were getting ready for our annual small group leaders' retreat, I felt the Holy Spirit point out to me that I had not taught about tongues properly. At first I was a little bit puzzled. I went back to the Bible, especially 1 Corinthians 12-14. And this is what I found. While Paul was correcting the Corinthian church about their spiritual immaturity in thinking and about their excesses in the practice of spiritual gifts, his emphasis is really on how tongues and prophecy should rightly function. One of my constant challenges in living out the Bible is emphasizing things in the same proportion as they are emphasized in the Bible itself. Since being a pastor, I have had many



people come to me with hurt from some churches saying, “They told me that if I didn’t speak in tongues, I didn’t have the Holy Spirit.” They were deeply hurt by such imbalances or misunderstandings of the Bible. I responded to this imbalance with an imbalance of my own, for which the Holy Spirit was correcting me.

To me it was very obvious from 1 Corinthians 12:29-31 that not every genuine Christian who has been baptized with the Holy Spirit would speak in tongues: “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts.” No reasonable person can read the text without hearing the loud and resounding “NO” to his many questions of “Do all?” No, not everyone speaks in tongues or interprets tongues. The whole point of chapter 12 is that the gifts are varied. “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone” (1 Corinthians 12: 4-6). Different Christians who have been baptized in the Holy Spirit have a variety of spiritual gifts. So I spent fifteen years emphasizing “you don’t have to speak in tongues...the Bible says so.” And I completely missed the balance and encouragement of Paul’s writing on tongues.

Chapter 13 is clear that love is the motive behind all spiritual gifts and if you have great gifting but not right love, you are a mess. Chapter 12 says the same thing when he states that, “Each [person] is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (v. 7). Your spiritual gifts are not for you, to make you feel good or useful or important, they are for the good of all the others! And the rest of chapters 12 and 13 are spent explaining this. But then in chapter 14 he gives them guidelines to correct their excesses (remember, I am talking about teaching and practicing the things

of the Bible in proportion to how they are talked about in the Bible itself). I noticed that Paul talks a lot about how they are to speak in tongues or encouraging right speaking in tongues, not just “not everyone does.” “The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself” (v. 4a). Not a bad thing to do; it’s kind of like eating food. When you eat it’s not to build others up, it’s for you! That is good. It’s just not helpful in the gathered church, because it doesn’t build up others. He goes on, “Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy” (v. 5). Really? Paul wants all of us to speak in tongues (and to prophesy)! So, building ourselves up is good and building others up is better—BUT DO BOTH in the right context. “I will pray with my spirit [tongues], but I will pray with my mind also [“normal” prayer]; I will sing praise with my spirit [tongues], but I will sing with my mind also” (1 Corinthians 14:15). He wants both. And then he says, “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you” (v. 18). Again, really? The apostle Paul spoke in tongues more than all of the excessive Corinthians? Yes, in his private prayer life. The issue was understandability in the gathered church; does the expression of the gift build others up or not? If not, be quiet.

Finally, he gives specific instructions on how to handle tongues in a gathering of the church: “If any speak in tongues, let there be only two or at the most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God” (1 Corinthians 14:27-28). So Paul believed and encouraged tongues and interpretation in a gathering of the church in limited amounts. He also encouraged praying in tongues in private, as he did. Then he finishes the chapter by telling them to “earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues” (v. 39).

I had been out of Biblical balance, and I am still trying to recover from this imbalance. I prayed in tongues in my private prayer life a lot. I would walk for miles praying in the Spirit or

singing in the Spirit. But when I taught the church on tongues, I would simply say “not everyone speaks in tongues,” instead of encouraging a right use of the good spiritual gift given to some by the precious Holy Spirit. When I got to the small group leader retreat (I bet you thought I forgot about the retreat), I knew he wanted me to repent to the group leaders and teach them in proper balance on the issue of tongues. Then I was to offer to pray for those who would like to receive the gift of tongues (and/or interpretation). Eighteen group leaders and spouses who did not pray in tongues responded, asking for the spiritual gift. To my amazement, sixteen of them received prayer tongues on the spot (and one began praying in tongues after the retreat ended). I had never seen that many people receive the gift in a single meeting. And their prayer life was greatly enriched by the new spiritual gift.

In the book of Acts, three of the five accounts of baptism with the Holy Spirit include the people speaking in tongues. Obviously, the apostles and others in Acts 2 spoke in tongues. Cornelius and his family spoke in tongues (Acts 10). The Ephesian men spoke in tongues (Acts 19). There is no account of Saul (to be Paul) speaking in tongues when he was empowered by the Holy Spirit in Acts 9, although I’ve already stated that later, in 1 Corinthians 14:18, he said, “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.” So at some point he received the gift—possibly at the beginning, or possibly later. And, finally, Acts 8 does not record the Samaritans who were baptized with the Holy Spirit speaking in tongues (although whatever the manifestations were, they were visible and dramatic enough that the text says in verse 18, “Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands...”). I would simply conclude that there are varied manifestations of the Holy Spirit’s power that are evident in those being baptized with the

Holy Spirit, of which speaking in tongues is common. But it's not the only one and possibly not the most dramatic!

You can't help but notice other wonderful evidences of the Holy Spirit's baptism like boldness to preach (Peter in Acts 2 and Saul in Acts 9), signs and wonders like physical healing or casting out demons (the apostles in Acts 2:43 and, more specifically, Peter and John in Acts 3), and obviously prophesying (Act 19 says that the Ephesian men were speaking in tongues and prophesying). But I would like to briefly point out that maybe the most wonderful manifestation of being baptized with the Holy Spirit is recorded in Romans 8. "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Romans 8:14-16). Amazing! We receive the manifestation that comes with our adoption as sons and daughter—the experiential knowing we are now His children and this causes us to cry out "Abba!" Martyn Lloyd-Jones, possibly the most remarkable British preacher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, says that we can be genuinely saved without this knowledge, just as we can have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit and have received His indwelling without having been empowered through His baptism (I suggest that you read "Joy Unspeakable" by Lloyd-Jones). But what an amazing experience to know...to feel...to delight in our adoption as sons and daughters! Peter expresses it well: "Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory" (1 Peter 1:8). I pray that whether or not we speak in tongues and do signs and wonders, all of us would experience this wonderful assurance as sons and daughters received in the baptism with the Holy Spirit.

## **Practical Implications for Local Churches**

Through my years as a pastor, I have believed and taught that everyone who believes in Jesus has been baptized with the Holy Spirit, whether or not they are aware of the fact. Now, with this shift in my Biblical understanding, some will ask, “How does this change what we do?” And it’s a good question. First, I am so thankful that Jesus has been working this out in me because there is a growing hope and longing that he would pour out the Holy Spirit’s power on His church like we have not seen in past two hundred years. The most devastating impact, as I said earlier, of the “if you believe in Jesus, you have been baptized with the Holy Spirit” theology is expecting nothing more than what we’ve already experienced. We should be asking the question “Is my Christian experience like those of the New Testament church in the Book of Acts?”

When we compare the experiences of the church in our day to the experiences of the church in the Book of Acts, we look terribly anemic! If we compare the descriptions of the Christian experience in the rest of the New Testament, our Christianity pales. As a group of churches, I want us to be stirred and unsatisfied when we see this disconnect so that we will pray for Jesus to act and move in such dramatic ways as we see in scripture. As I read the biographies of the men who led the church during the first and second great awakenings of the 1700s and 1800s, I long for true revival that only the Holy Spirit can bring (see the list of biographies in the appendix). So the biggest practical change that I hope this shift in understanding will bring among us is that we will pray! We trust the sovereignty of God and His wisdom and choice to give times of outpouring. And we pray for Him to act and move for His own glory in our day and in our time!

Second, we need to be attentive to the real possibility that we could have a very clear structure as churches with very little evidence of the Holy Spirit’s presence and power among us. We are not

prone to charismatic excesses, but are extremely vulnerable to shying away from the Holy Spirit's manifest activity. We need to take care to not "grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Ephesians 4:30). Paul tells us this in the context of warning us to be careful that we are actually living and acting in ways that are pleasing to Jesus. In addition, not carefully guarding our Biblical doctrine will grieve the Holy Spirit. Paul warns, "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths" (2 Timothy 4:3-4). We experienced this first hand, with most of our friends compromising the actual texts of the Bible and wandering off after egalitarianism.

Further, we must also be careful to obey Paul's command: "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast to what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:19-20). For us, to "quench the Spirit" would be to be embarrassed by His power or to keep the church so neat and clean that there is little room for His activity. Paul tells the excessive Corinthians to "earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But all things should be done decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:39-40). We have "decently and in order" down pat. We simply need to "earnestly desire" more in the midst of the church. At this point, for reasons that I explained earlier, I do not allow speaking in tongues during a public Sunday service. But if we are not encouraging the right expressions of tongues and interpretation in other contexts, we might qualify as "quenching the Spirit." If we are not helping those with a genuine prophetic gifting to grow and mature in right use of this gift, we are falling short. Team meetings, prayer meetings, leader meetings, retreats, and conferences are all very appropriate places for the exercise of these spiritual gifts, as long as we follow the clear direction and limits in 1 Corinthians 14.

I complete this section by confessing that there is still much that I need to learn. After all of the dramatic shifts and changes that Jesus has led us in during the past six years, I wonder at what he will do next. We are obviously a work in progress. As long as we can continue to be honest, wholeheartedly seeking Jesus and being willing to be confronted by the Bible, he will faithfully lead us into all he has planned. I tremble at the challenges that we face and pray for the grace of God to remain true to Him in everything.

## **Praying Together**

Between Christmas and New Year at the end of 2009, I felt the Holy Spirit nudge me to pray alone for one hour every day. I groaned. I'm embarrassed to admit the truth, but it sounded really difficult to do. I've spent so much time trying to make myself pray and failing miserably. One hour was so long. I knew I could force my way through it; it didn't sound like fun. But I obeyed. To my amazement, after ten or fifteen minutes of trying to pray and feeling like I was swimming in mud, something happened. I could feel the Holy Spirit's presence. I was weeping in prayer. Longings for God to act and move at Blue Sky Church and in the network of churches rose up within me. A kind of joy and delight filled me, and I worshiped. I lost track of time and before I knew it the hour and more was gone. The next day and the next week were the same; there was ten minutes or so of heaviness to press through, and then wonderful freedom! I was amazed that such grace had been given to me so that I could pray. Each day a theme or focus to my prayers clearly developed as the Holy Spirit would lead me and move me with deep groans and longings and hope.

Then in January of 2010, I felt His nudge to get the pastors together to pray each work day morning for an hour or two before we started work. I could feel His correction to me that I had led like a business manager, and I felt Him saying, "You must become spiritual men." So we prayed together and the experience was very much like when I prayed alone. We would experience a period of heaviness and difficulty trying to pray and then, suddenly, there would be a release and freedom that amazed us. Weeping and longing and hope would fill us. I was in awe of God at the wonderful truth the Holy Spirit would bring to our minds as we prayed. He would speak wonderful promises to us. Then later in January, at the network lead pastor gathering, Jeff Miller, one of the lead pastors,



spoke the same thing to the group that I had felt a couple of weeks earlier: “We must become spiritual men!” We prayed together and the experience was amazing.

I had scheduled a night of prayer and worship for Blue Sky, based on a nudge that I had felt. But I was confused about how to pray with a larger group of the church in the same manner in which we had been praying. How could we pray together with so many of us in the room? I didn’t want to just have an “open mic” kind of prayer meeting; it felt like it was too hard to lead. And like he always does, Jesus was unfolding His own plan for us with learning how to pray together. At about the same time, I was invited by John Lanferman of New Frontiers Churches to meet with him and Terry Virgo (the leader of the movement from England). John and I were talking after Terry had gone to bed, and he started talking about “prayer meetings” at their conferences. I asked him questions about how they prayed with such a large group and he was amazed that I had never been in a Christian prayer meeting as he was describing. I left that visit with a sense of the Holy Spirit’s lead in adding another ingredient to my thinking on praying together.

I began to see that if trusted leaders, whom I knew carried our style and values well, were leading the prayer, I might avoid confusion or unnecessary messes. I started the time of prayer by teaching the church about praying together from Acts 4:23-31 (after Peter and John had been threatened and released). I was intrigued by the phrase, “They lifted their voices together to God” (v. 24). We were very familiar with praying together and agreeing when doing prayer ministry (laying hands on someone to pray for them specifically). Praying together like this was something that I had not experienced on a large scale. So I asked six or eight pastors and leaders to stand in the front of the room with two microphones that they could step up to one at a time to lead in prayer. When we did the night of prayer and worship at Blue Sky, it was overwhelmingly similar to my prayer times

alone or the times when the pastors prayed together. The Holy Spirit rested on us with power and the entire room was full of weeping, and longing, and prayer. We lingered on one topic for a while and then, when it felt like we were done with that one, we would move on to another as we felt the Holy Spirit leading. We prayed for forty-five minutes or an hour. It was such fun!

As a group of churches, we are underdeveloped in praying together. We inherited a wonderful model of hands-on prayer that we use in praying for individuals. But to approach God in prayer like they did in Acts 4 is not familiar. We have been weak in this, but we are growing! The pastors at Blue Sky have been praying together daily since January of 2010. I wondered how long we could continue before it would become dry or dull or routine. But this hasn't happened. We still often start with a time of heaviness that we have to press through and then we experience a wonderful, bright sense of the Holy Spirit's presence and lead. At our recent Summer Conference 2011, we prayed together with 800 people in the room with the same model. I asked trusted leaders who were especially responsive in prayer to lead the people in prayer as we lifted our voices together to God. We lingered on four or five different topics and prayed together for about forty-five minutes. The entire conference of people was weeping and praying with hope and longing for God to act and move among us to save and build His churches.

So we are growing in prayer. We are learning to linger together in the presence of God. We pray for the grace given by Jesus to make us into spiritual men and women. I'm not scheduling a lot of nights of prayer and worship. I think we did two in 2010 and none in 2011. Maybe we will do one in the fall. I'm not trying to force something to happen; we cannot force the hand of God. We just go forward enjoying this new, wonderfully refreshing experience of praying together in the midst of what we do. I plan for us to begin praying together more frequently at our Team Meetings. Our

pastors will continue to pray together every day in the office; praying in an essential part of our work as Christian leaders. I can't imagine that we will ever have another Network Summer Conference without having a couple of sessions where we pray together as a group of churches. Jesus is doing something in us. He is unfolding a plan for His own name and glory. Maybe it's only that we would be nearer to Him or maybe He is preparing us for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that will result in the salvation of many. I pray for both. We are desperately dependent on Jesus in the challenges that He has placed before us. We cannot do this; we must turn to Him in prayer! May God give us His grace, in this network of churches, to become a people who pray together in the power of the Holy Spirit.

## **Church Planting**

A major part of our vision since we planted Vine Church has been local churches giving themselves away through church planting. Long before we planted the first church out of Vine, we were committed to doing whatever Jesus asked to see that new churches were started in university cities all over the United States and, later, in other countries. Planting is the most effective way forward in making disciples for Jesus; it is simply an intentional part of the greater mission that Jesus would be known and glorified.

All of the lead pastors in the network have agreed: as a general rule we will not plant from the churches that we lead until they have reached 500 people. This is to safeguard the network from planting churches where there is not enough leadership ability to replicate values and reproduce leaders. But more importantly, we don't want to hurt the sending church; we want her to continue growing in making new disciples and to plant other churches. A friend from another group of churches, where they plant new churches from small churches, was recently talking with me about our plan to wait until the sending church is larger. His comment about planting out of small churches was, "Our model is like teenagers having babies!" A church trying to plant new churches when not fully mature is not good for the mother, nor is it good for the baby. Part of this is related to our conception of team size.

### **Planting Teams**

When planting a new church, we want to send teams of twenty-five to fifty people (and for local plants, many more). We also assume that about ten to twenty percent of the small group leaders from the sending church will go on each plant that we send (probably just a practical reality that

many of the very committed group leaders will want to go on church plants). I've been advising lead pastors not to let any more than ten percent go on each plant in larger churches—it's too hard to recover. Churches between 500 and 1,000 with thirty to fifty small groups might find that they send up to twenty percent of their group leaders. This is right and good but, for a very small church, the drain in resources is sure to hurt the foundation by taking too many leaders (leaders who are also necessary for the new church plant). So we want the sending church to be more established and have more resources, both in finances and in leadership. And then disciple making through church planting begins.

Once a church has reached approximately 500 and begins planting, we hope that each church will plant every other year. For churches over 1,000, I hope that we can produce church planters fast enough to plant every year. But understand what this means. Every area of leadership development in the sending church must be functioning amazingly! To plant every other year, sending ten to twenty percent of the small group leaders, we must raise up new group leaders at a rate of ten percent every year (and if we plant every year—twenty percent every year). I think it's doable, but we cannot get behind. If we do, either church planting stalls or the leadership structure of the sending church is harmed.

This principle also applies with worship leaders. Can we have one new worship leader every other year, ready to lead in a plant? For larger churches, this means having a new worship leader in the pipeline every year. We will need to have five or six worship leaders in process at any given time. We must! Children's programs must produce new kids directors; bookkeepers must replicate themselves; and administrative staff must find others with like gifts. And lead pastors must be able to, with help from the network leaders, find other young men whom Jesus is calling to plant new

churches. You might say that this is the best test possible of whether or not a church is actually doing well in making disciples, getting people serving, developing leaders, etc. Or has the church become large with a low commitment and operating with leadership systems that are no longer doing what they were meant to do?

### **Identifying and Training Church Planters**

The challenge of identifying and training called church planters is a huge challenge in and of itself. The model that we inherited for church planters was basically, “If you think you’re called to plant a church, we will give you \$2,500 and you can go give it a try” (to be fair, in the later years there was some assessment to determine whether or not the person was designed to be a planter). But the model that has developed in our thinking over recent years is dramatically different. We want to identify young men in their early to mid-twenties and train them on staff for three to five years before sending them. They become homegrown pastors who do not have to try to carry our values of doing local church but, rather, it flows in their veins. What we do, why we do it, and the relationships that will be needed over the years to do it well are developing and maturing in them over their years as members of the church and, later, serving as a staff pastor. These relationships include both members of the team who will go with them and the men who will be their leaders in the network. Healthy leadership relationships gives protection and security that is necessary to survive a church plant well.

When identifying potential church planters, we are looking for young men in their twenties who have clear calling to be overseers, along with a strong leadership gifting that manifests itself in vision and the ability to initiate new things. Some say that they are “entrepreneurial.” They always have big plans for themselves, even before surrendering to Jesus. They are not passive and are clearly risk-takers. In whatever context they find themselves, they influence other people. People

like them and want to be around them. They meet the qualifications of overseers and, in addition, have a large dose of leadership. The lead pastors must carefully test young men to see what Jesus has planned for them. We do this by leading them through a simple process of development so that whether they are to be faithful members, staff pastors, non-staff overseers, or church planters, they become everything Jesus intends. Those that are called to be long-term staff pastors and church planters will, in time, be brought on staff. For those that prove to be church planters, the next three to five years will be a time of training, testing, and maturing as pastors. The goal is that their character and gifting has been so proven over this time that we have a high degree of assurance that they will do well and, thus, we can send them with a significant amount of money.

### **Funding Church Plants**

We want to send each church plant with between \$200,000 and \$250,000 of support over the first three years. This includes an offering taken at the sending church before the plant is sent, monthly support to cover the lead pastor's salary at 100/66/33 percent over the three years, and other monthly support offered by the sending church and other churches in the network. The logic is that because we have a high degree of certainty that it is the right planter at the right time in a city to which he is called, we can send generous support with confidence that it will result in a healthy church that makes disciples. We are not assuming that money and training guarantee the success of a church plant. Only Jesus giving His favor and the blessing of the Holy Spirit can assure that the result is a healthy, reproducing church. But by following the Holy Spirit's lead through the process of identifying and thoroughly training the planter over three to five years and by following His lead on when and where the new church is to be planted, we hope to have greater assurance that the plant is going to be blessed by Jesus. Thus, the money that is given for the plant will produce the result

that Jesus wants. This is our desire and, to assure that we can do this, we need many church planters in the pipeline that are preparing to plant.

### **Network Church Planting Fund**

During 2003, I felt the Holy Spirit nudge me to start praying for a multi-million dollar church planting fund. I started praying for two million and soon found myself praying for twenty million. While we're still far from twenty million, at the time I'm writing this, over 1.3 million dollars have been given to the fund and a team to oversee the planning and distribution of the fund is in place. Because one of the great challenges before us is raising up enough potential church planters, we are using the fund to get more planters in the process of training, with the \$200,000 plus of support for the plant primarily coming from the sending church.

As I've stated above, we are looking for young men who are homegrown. This means they have been shaped and developed as disciples of Jesus in one of our churches so that they don't have to try to implement our values—they live and breathe them—it's the water in which they swim. We are looking for men who are clearly called and have been properly tested and proven as pastors (thus, they must serve on staff for 3-5 years). This means that if a church is going to send a plant in four years, the planter must be on staff now (the planter for two years later must already be identified and close to coming on staff). The Network Planting Fund is used to help local churches bring these potential planters on staff sooner than they normally would be able to.

A lead pastor from any church in the network that is over 300 people can put in a request for planting funds to bring on a specific, potential church planter every other year. Not every potential planter brought on staff will be supported by the network fund; many will be supported by the local church as they hire staff pastors to lead discipleship communities. The Network Church Planting



Fund is meant to supplement the ongoing pastor/leader development process by bringing on *additional* potential planters (i.e., more in the pipeline). The potential planter must meet the requirements of an overseer as outlined in 1 Timothy 3. It is understood that they are a *potential* planter and, thus, we cannot guarantee that they will plant. But we must have a reasonable assurance based on what we know from the Bible and our experience that they will plant.

Before any lead pastor submits a request for funding, the leader of the network must be in agreement with the lead pastor that we are reasonably sure that the person will plant a church. Then based on the lead pastor's request and the leader of the network's recommendation, the team overseeing the Network Church Planting Fund decides whether or not to approve the support for the local church. This decision is based on available funds, number of requests, financial need of the church, assurance of actually producing a church planter from the investment, and the Holy Spirit's lead. Approved funds are dispersed on a decreasing scale over three years, with the local church taking over an increasing amount of the support each year. We base this model on the assumption that a new pastoral staff member pays for himself over the first couple of years on staff by providing additional leadership which produces church growth and increased giving.

If a local church takes on average seven to eight years to reach 500 people and begin planting other churches and, once they start, can plant a new church every other year, we can plant sixty churches in the next fifteen years (and over 400 churches in the next thirty years!). So you begin to see the relevance of the Network Church Planting Fund. We need these church planters on staff and training so that they are prepared when the time comes to send them. And we need a constant flow of new potential planters identified and preparing two to four years before they are ready to bring on staff to continue training. We need to find them as university students so that they are being made into disciples and tested properly while still at the university. Then we bring them on staff once they

graduate (at twenty-two or twenty-three years old). By the time they train on staff for three to five years, they are somewhere in their mid to late twenties when we send them out.

Here is a checklist used by lead pastors in helping get these young men ready to bring on staff:

**Potential Church Planter Checklist**  
**“Ideas for developing a potential planter before he is on staff as a pastor”**  
**Steve Morgan—2011**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ Serving on teams with reliability and skill.
- ☐ Committed in a Small Group and helpful to his group leader.
- ☐ Responds well to you and other pastors when asked to get lunch/coffee, talk, etc.
- ☐ Evidence of Holy Spirit’s power on him when receiving prayer (at least from time to time).
- ☐ Engages in worship regularly (doesn’t seem bored, disconnected, or unexpressive).
- ☐ Finished the Series and has committed to membership.
- ☐ Well respected by other people inside and outside the church.
- ☐ Gives tithes faithfully and participates in offerings with generosity.
- ☐ Honest and transparent when asked about his struggles and sin, current and past.
- ☐ Invites people to the church consistently and has helped someone who was being saved.
- ☐ Responds well when you tell him “no” or ask him to change/improve some behavior/lifestyle.
- ☐ Budgets personal finances well.
- ☐ You have personally asked him the “Questions of Character and Integrity” just for fun!
- ☐ Leads a Small Group well (people want to be around him...the group grows).
- ☐ Raised up another leader and has multiplied a group at least once.
- ☐ Self-control is evident in his life and he is able to live with ongoing sexual purity.
- ☐ Dating relationship or marriage is healthy.
- ☐ Wife is as devoted as he is and can handle pressure with faith (may be shy or outgoing).
- ☐ Planned/led in some specific event as intern or volunteer (party, youth, kids, student event...).
- ☐ Manages budget for an event or project well (give budget for some event and teach him how).
- ☐ Reliable and consistent with responsibilities that are entrusted to him.
- ☐ You, personally, really trust him.
- ☐ Taught the Bible effectively in some context (Series, DC, Prayer Training, etc.).

The purpose of the checklist is to give the lead pastor ideas on how to help prepare a man to be a pastor and church planter. With everything that we do and all of the demands that come at us, it is too easy to overlook some critical area of preparation. The checklist simply helps the lead pastor to be systematic in thinking through each potential planter's needs. With the Holy Spirit's leading and by the grace of God, may we be equipped to pour into them all that they will need for the call that Jesus places upon their lives.

Once they are on as a staff pastor, the three to five years will give them the practical experience and the life application of the amazing truth of the Bible. The process and the outcome are based in our belief that "all scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The goal of having the years of preparation is that there would be adequate time for this testing and proving to take place, which is ultimately done by Jesus Himself. Then when we have the right planters with sufficient preparation and enough finances, what's next? Let me outline how it might look to take a prepared planter through the process of identifying a location, gathering a team, and leaving to actually plant the new church.

### **Identifying a Location**

Some of my own stories of planting Vine and Blue Sky may be misleading for church planters when considering where to plant. In both cases for me, there was a dramatic encounter with the Holy Spirit where I was surprised (and terrified) by what Jesus was asking of me. But in both cases I was not planning nor preparing for what Jesus was about to do. I didn't intend to be a pastor and, thus, was not intentionally being prepared for such a task. Then, later, I intended to stay at Vine Church all

of my life and had no desire to move to one of the most unchurched cities in the United States and plant another church. Jesus had to hit me hard to get my attention!

But for a young man who has been identified as a potential planter by a lead pastor and has been intentionally being prepared, there are not the same kinds of surprises. All of this to say that the experiences or direction regarding the location for the church plant may not be dramatic or shocking. They know that they are probably going to plant a church in three to five years. They know that the church will likely be in a mid-sized university city. So there is no great need for Jesus to move dramatically to get them to obey; they have been getting ready all along. At the same time, understand that he will give clear and sufficient direction to take the risks that he puts before them; he always does.

Identifying the right city is done in cooperation with the sending lead pastor and starts at about a year before the anticipated move date. Before this time, I strongly discourage potential planters from even thinking about the day when they will plant. It is too distracting from their current responsibilities and we don't know for certain if they will even plant. But when it's time, the process of deciding where to plant will take place between May and September, hoping to have the location pinned down by November at the latest. Usually the planter has some suspicions of where Jesus may want him to be, although it can be difficult to sort through his personal preferences. Loving the mountains or ocean or warm weather can all color his ability to think clearly about the best place. Once the lead pastor and the planter have a potential "short list" of three or four possible location that they have been praying about, the next order of business is to visit the cities together. What do the city and university feel like? What is the condition of the churches that are already there? Is there truly a need for a church like us? Will the planter be the right fit for the culture? Is there a sense

from the Holy Spirit that it is right? Have there been any prophetic words or dreams or visions that might confirm the location? All of this is carefully weighed and prayed through.

Once it has been narrowed down to a couple of locations, it's probably time for the planter to take his wife to these two cities and see how she feels. Larry Anderson's hick proverb, "If the wife ain't happy, ain't nobody happy" is not entirely untrue. The location must be a good fit for the family, and his wife is going to be looking at schools, houses, and trying to see if it might feel like home. Obviously this is not an exact science. You look, you soak, you pray, and you seek Godly counsel from your leaders. I usually will have a feel of whether or not this specific location is safe for this particular planting couple, but they must have a sense of calling or desire to plant in that specific place. I am always wary about someone going to the city where they grew up or wanting to move there to be close to family (In Luke 4:24, Jesus wasn't joking when he said "no prophet is acceptable in his hometown"). There is nothing wrong with being close to family (and there are many benefits), but thinking that it will be a happy deal to become your brother-in-law's pastor might have landmines and challenges that you have not considered.

Long distance moves, we've learned from experience, are the most difficult for the planter and for the team. There should be a very clear indication from the Holy Spirit that he is directing such a move before taking the leap. I'm positive that Jesus told me that I had to plant Blue Sky. It was either move to the Seattle area and plant a church or knowingly disobey Him. If I was not positive, I would have never survived the first years when we faced great difficulties and challenges related to distance, climate, and cultural differences.

When the lead pastor, planting couple, and network overseer have all agreed that it's the right location, the decision is made by the lead pastor on when to announce to the church that the church plant will take place and where. Up to this point, the planter has had to keep all of this confidential. It's very important that he is not even subtly gathering a team or talking about it before he has been released to do so. But if the church plant is leaving in the summer to have the church up and running before the university is back in session for fall, it needs to be announced by the December team meeting. We announce when, where, and what the process will be for gathering a team.

### **Gathering a Team**

Having a great team is essential for the plant to flourish from the beginning. You need to have good balance in demographics, relatively mature disciples, and confidence that it's safe for all concerned. If the initial team can look like a small version of the church that we are hoping to plant, it will be much easier to accomplish the task. When we were moving to Seattle to plant Blue Sky, we knew that part of the calling was to reach Asians. And Jesus faithfully provided seven Asians to be on the original team of fifty; we were ten percent Chinese, plus two originally from India. If you are going to a city that has a good population of African-Americans, having your team begin with African-Americans is important. You might have to pray a lot—but pray! We didn't start Vine with any African-Americans, even though Jesus had clearly spoken that racial reconciliation was a major part of the church's calling in Carbondale. But it took ten years for this promise to begin being fulfilled. By having a team that is multi-ethnic from the beginning, we have a much better chance of planting the multi-ethnic churches to which Jesus has called us.

In addition to being multi-ethnic, the team needs to be multi-generational. We plant churches in university cities that are for both students and working people. We need all generations

represented in the churches for there to be true maturity and a healthy community. Most of the time, risk comes more easily to younger people. I understand this better and better as I get older; I don't like change quite as much, and I find myself looking for peace and quiet—not another adventure. I constantly pray that Jesus would provide more retired couples who would joyfully go on church plants to be a support to the younger pastors and leaders. Larry and Carol Anderson offered that support to me and my family when we planted Vine, and I doubt that I would have survived the process without them. However, Jesus accomplishes His purpose through whatever means he chooses. If the team has married couples, singles, university students, and parents with children, the church plant will be off to a good start. It's nice if there is someone who is older than the lead pastor, as long as they have a right heart and are truly willing to serve without demanding anything (including the planter's time and/or personal friendship).

Further, the team members need to be relatively mature as Christians. This doesn't necessarily mean that they have been Christians for a long time. But, as with group leaders, I would expect that they have had evidence in their lives of being regenerated for at least a year. This gives enough time to observe both their developing beliefs and the real changes in their lifestyle. You cannot take people with you on a church plant that will be very vulnerable to temptation or those who have not yet had adequate time to prove their faith through challenges and testing. It's always nice to have a mix of newer Christians, who are full of faith and zeal, and those who have followed Jesus longer, who offer wisdom and stability. If the planter or the sending pastor has any hesitation about a potential team member, you should error on the side of caution. Some people will flourish in a larger church and continue to mature, but the pressures and spiritual conflicts that accompany planting a



church may take them out. It must be safe for them and safe for the church plant. Jesus will make it clear in each person's case.

When the lead pastor first announces the plant at a team meeting, he will also let everyone know how the process of gathering a team for the plant will work. First, everyone should pray for the right team for the new church. Second, anyone who thinks that Jesus may want them to go on this plant should make themselves known to the planter. Third, not everyone who is interested will be approved to go; both the lead pastor and the planter must agree that it is a good fit and that it's the right time. Lastly, it must be clearly good for the potential team member, the new plant, and the sending church (e.g., as I've said, we don't want to send any more than ten percent of our small group leaders, etc.). After the announcement and vision casting by the lead pastor, the planter begins the two-month process of discerning who should go and who should stay. This means lots of meetings with people, asking questions, listening to their reasons for wanting to go, and assuring them that you will prayerfully consider the possibility. It's a busy time because in addition to all of this, the planter is still carrying on all of his normal responsibilities at the sending church.

If the plant was announced at the December team meeting, the team will likely be finalized by the first of February. Team training meetings then begin and will continue up until it is time to move, sometime between the end of May and first of July. This process will include team building, training, selection of initial leaders, retreats, prayer groups, etc. By about the end of April, all of the team members will transition out of the small groups at the sending church and now be completely involved in prayer groups for the plant. They will also be in the process of transitioning out of all areas of service at the sending church. At the same time, by the first of May, the planting pastor will be relieved of all responsibilities at the church and move out of his office. He will then be fully

thrown into the intensity of preparing for the new church. It's important that they don't do this too early. It is a hard process for both those that are going and those that are staying. Many will be saying goodbye to dear friends and the time is filled with excitement, joy, and sorrow over the changes. Staying connected at the sending church until quite close to the time to actually move is important for the sake of everyone involved.

### **Leaving for the Plant**

Moving is filled with emotion of all kinds. When we were leaving Carbondale to plant Blue Sky, my entire family cried as we drove out of town and had to force ourselves to not look back. It took us all the way to Iowa to stop crying. Vine Church was our family. We had experienced so much together, and they were our dear friends. To leave them was one of the most difficult things that we had ever done. One of my friends on the team yelled out the window of the moving truck after saying goodbye to friends in Vine's parking lot and driving away in tears: "They don't tell you this in the church planting manual!" So I'm telling you now. It's wonderful and hard. There is so much sacrifice and so many dear people that you will leave behind. But there is also much hope and anticipation of what Jesus will do in the new city. Christians have been making such sacrifices and facing such challenges ever since all of the Christians except the apostles were driven out of Jerusalem by persecution in Acts 8. "Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ" (Acts 8:5). This is what we do; we are Christians.

Then the process begins of making the new city home, finding jobs, learning your way around, and making new friends. Preparations for summer parties to which everyone can invite people are underway and the plans for starting the first small groups are being implemented. The new church office is being set up and the lead pastor is crazy with details on where to meet for

Sundays, purchasing equipment, refining the web site, and planning the end-of-summer start up. Everyone on the team is critically involved in serving in many areas to see that everything is ready and that people have been invited. Ads are place in the newspapers and flyers posted all over campus announcing the first Sunday service. Then, in some ways, it feels like “business as usual.” Be disciples, obey Jesus, invite new friends to Him, and work hard at your job or school...real people living as followers of Jesus. What a wonderful privilege to be a part of such happenings. Jesus is still building His church, and we get to be a part of it.

The following is a timeline and checklist for church planters and lead pastors to use throughout the year prior to sending a new plant. It is intended as a guide to help remind us of key issues that need to be addressed and the approximate timing for handling each issue. We want to keep each church planter from having to “reinvent the wheel.” While the personality and specific gifts of each planter will be clearly reflected in the church that he plants, tools like the timeline and checklist are intended to make the job less stressful.

## **Church Planting Checklist—2011**

The checklist is based on the assumption that we are planting in university cities with June/July as the move date, and August/September as the first service date:

### **A. Timing and Location (May-Dec of previous year)**

- ☐ Decide on planting city with sending pastor.
- ☐ Announce plant during team meeting at sending church (Nov/Dec).
- ☐ Meet with potential team members.
- ☐ Schedule church plant offering date with sending pastor.
- ☐ Sending pastor and salary team from sending church does the planter's contract for the first three years.

### **B. Team Gathering (Dec-Jan)**

- ☐ Consider asking questions of character/integrity with individual team members.
- ☐ Identify worship leader and (initial band members?). Begin training with sending worship leader.
- ☐ Schedule team meetings (8-12 meetings).
- ☐ Schedule retreats (2 retreats, 1 at target city).
- ☐ Schedule a team trip to visit a church plant on a Sunday, preferably one that is still setting up every weekend.
- ☐ Create a team meeting / retreat teaching plan. Bible reading plan? Book reading plan?
- ☐ Decide on church name and design logo (Identify potential graphics person).
- ☐ Attend membership series classes and hands-on prayer training to gain an understanding of how to teach the classes.

### **C. Team Training—Phase 1 (Feb-April)**

- ☐ Final team decided.
- ☐ Schedule first church plant team meeting, and begin having meetings every other week.
- ☐ Transition team member tithes from sending church. Three months before move date 50% of team tithe goes to plant, and 50% to sending church.
- ☐ Locate office and training center to lease.
- ☐ Locate Sunday morning meeting space (Schedule trial run Sunday service 1 week before start date).
- ☐ Choose a bookkeeper and begin training at sending church at least 2 months before move.
- ☐ Identify children's director.
- ☐ Plan to sell your house and find a new place to live.
- ☐ By April, lead last DC at the sending church.
- ☐ Team members who are small group leaders at sending church transition out of leading group.
- ☐ Have first church plant retreat.

#### **D. Team Training—Phase 2 (May-June)**

- ☐ Have church plant offering at sending church.
- ☐ Church plant team transitioned out of small group at sending church.
- ☐ Church planter out of all responsibility at sending church.
- ☐ Begin Prayer groups.
- ☐ Have second church plant retreat.
- ☐ Purchases
  - Purchase initial office computers and software.
  - Purchase a sound system and any instruments needed (with counsel of network worship leader).
  - Purchase trailer, may be able to beg from previous church plant.
  - Purchase liability and property insurance (company: Brotherhood Mutual).
  - Have website designed and launch by move date.
- ☐ Choose initial board of three, including lead pastor and sending pastor.
- ☐ Legal / Financial
  - Prepare new church by-laws from network sample.
  - Fill out state non-profit incorporation.
  - File IRS 501(c)3 application and tax exempts (after incorporation).
  - Open bank accounts in new city after church plant offering and incorporation is completed.
  - Contract Payroll Company for new church (company: Kemper).
- ☐ Create first 6-month budget (After church plant offering, team giving, leases, insurance, and initial cost for worship equipment and office are established). Budget 1% of church plant offerings going to network support.
- ☐ Create 12-month church calendar, including January vision night, series, team meetings, etc.
- ☐ Create a preaching schedule for the first 6 months (May consider scheduling the whole first year...including Team Meetings).
- ☐ Identify pastoral assistant, possible 1<sup>st</sup> staff pastor.
- ☐ One month before move, design initial invitation cards.
- ☐ Choose initial small group leaders, 1 for every 8-12 adults.

#### **E. Planting (July-Aug)**

- ☐ Move to church plant city.
- ☐ Prepare for small group topics when Sunday services begin.
- ☐ Begin church plant small groups.
- ☐ Set up the office. Begin to prepare simple systems for running the church (bookkeeping, money handling procedures, first-time visitor follow up, etc.).
- ☐ Plan parties for 2 months out before starting Sunday services, and have invitations ready.
- ☐ Begin having bi-weekly outreach parties.
- ☐ Prepare graphics and signage for first Sunday service.
- ☐ Prepare ads and flyers for first Sunday service.

## **After Starting Sunday Services**

There is some sense where it really may feel like “business as usual” once the Sunday service and small groups are up and running. However, nothing is further from the truth. A new church plant has very little equity with the people that are visiting. There is no building, no history of success, no track record of integrity, and no guarantee that the new church will become a healthy, vibrant church. Because we are planting out of churches that are 500 people or larger, the sending church had all of these things. There must be enough quality leadership, effective teaching, Holy Spirit-filled worship, and real relationships to outweigh the risks of coming to such a new church. And not everyone is willing to take such a risk.

Sometimes we talk about this in terms of the temperament of different individuals. Some people are pioneers; they love risks and thrive on new experiences. Pioneers are excited about the possibilities of a new church. Other people are settlers; they love safety and do best in contexts that are secure and predictable. Settlers do not often come into a church plant in the early stages. It’s simply too uncertain. These “temperaments” are not only influenced by differences in personality, but are greatly influenced by the person’s stage in life.

Usually church plants initially draw young people in their twenties, both singles and young married couples. The freedoms of their stage in life still allow risks to be taken without much stress, and they are still very good at making new friendships. Those that are a bit older and are married with children are beginning to experience the challenge of, “Do I really have enough emotional energy to go around.” Between marriage, work, financial responsibility, and the endless pressures of parenting, many couples begin to find themselves overwhelmed and shying away from new risks. To

make it more challenging, most people are not as good at making new friendships as they get older and after they are married.

Because a new church plant is risky business, many people are not willing to engage until the church has proven with growth and integrity that they are around for the long haul. Some of these people will watch a church for years to “see what happens.” Then many of these settlers start coming around the church when they get a reputable-looking facility or grow to 300 or 400 people. All of this simply means that a new church plant must do everything possible to feel like a safe place. Quality in everything and the capacity of the team for healthy social relationships are the keys.

First, when everything is well done, the new church communicates their belief that what they are doing is very important. With churches quality doesn't guarantee success; there are many other factors, not the least of which is having the favor and blessing of Jesus. But quality in what is done by the church does help people to feel more assurance that the church will be a good deal. Let me explain further. When I go into a restaurant, I always have an opinion about whether or not they will make it. If the floors are dirty or the staff is distracted or the food is average or the décor is sloppy—I can be pretty sure of the ultimate outcome of that restaurant. If you go into a church and there is no one to greet you or the person welcoming you is socially awkward, you won't have confidence in the church. If the coffee is lukewarm or the music is bad or the teaching is not helpful or the graphics are subpar—you can be pretty sure that the church will not do well. You can say, “But those things are not the really important purposes of the church” all you want. People will vote with their feet by not coming back. At least more mature, social-emotionally healthy leaders will. If you want a healthy church in which to make disciples for Jesus, quality in everything you do is very important.

Second, the team having the capacity for healthy social relationships is another major factor to offset the fact that the church is new. Understand, I'm not criticizing those who are socially awkward or introverted; I find myself shy or awkward at times. But for a church plant to win people, the visitors must feel that within the church there is the possibility for genuine friendships (or at least enjoyable acquaintances). You've probably heard someone say that no leader will actually be effective in leading someone who has higher leadership ability than they do. It's the same here. The degree of social-emotional health of the original team will set the ceiling for what type of people will come into the church. How team members are able to interact with new people is critical. Their ability to be sensitive to someone's desire for more or less interaction when they come into the Sunday service will make all of the difference. When team members cannot discern that a person doesn't really want to talk much, they will overwhelm newcomers by continuing to ask questions and trying to get to know them more. The most socially healthy will be able to feel that they should be warm, but give this person their space; they will read people's nonverbal cues to know when to move in and when to back off. Because we plant relational churches, it is very important that new church plants are aware of these issues.

During these early stages in planting a new church, the lead pastor must constantly communicate vision. What kind of church are we becoming? Why do we do what we do? What will the church be like in a year or in five? Welcoming people, while preaching, and times of personal interaction where he tells the story of why he is planting this church, are all contexts for vision casting. It's not being a salesman. People will see through this. Instead, it is having such a genuine love for Jesus and, thus, loving people so much that you believe in this mission with all of your heart.



You must have a devotion to lead and care for the people, not simply want the church to grow so that you can succeed. When this is real in the pastor, people will feel it and begin to trust him.

All of these issues can be very challenging for a church planter because he comes from a church of 500 or more. In a larger church, critical mass takes over and many people will come just because it looks like it's happening because of a nice facility. Also, those who want to remain anonymous can do so in a larger church, while in a church plant you stick out like a sore thumb! In a larger church, they can observe for a time to see what it's really like. But in a small church, everyone knows that they are new and wants to talk with them. It can be very uncomfortable for new friends. Understanding these dynamics will help the planter to lead the team through the challenges of winning people in a small church context.

### **Personal Invitations**

Let me address one final challenge in adjusting from a larger church to a church plant. In a larger church, many disciples just assume that new people come to the church through advertisements, web site, or seeing the facility. While it's true that some do come this way, especially as the church gets larger, most people still come to a church through the personal invitation of the friend or family member. When members are not inviting in a larger church, even though it certainly hurts the mission to make new disciple, no one seems to notice. But in a church plant, where very few new guests are coming in the door, it's obvious to everyone that something is wrong. For a church plant to get off the ground, everyone must be telling their story to neighbors and co-workers. All team members need contexts where they are making new friends. Every interaction with people in the community is an opportunity to gently and respectfully invite someone to come.

Our leaders have been learning, when we interact with someone that we like, to ask, “Can I invite you to my church?” It has amazed us how many people are willing to let you invite them. Giving them a card so that they can check out the web site is usually helpful. When someone asks, “What brought you to town?” it is an opportunity to briefly tell your story. The lead pastor must tell his story over and over. When I was first planting Vine, I listened to a tape series on church planting where it was suggested that a church planter must tell his story to at least twenty people each week. I was amazed at the opportunities that the Holy Spirit arranged when I resolved to risk letting people know what we were doing. The lead pastor may be tempted to isolate himself in the office doing administrative tasks. But, if he wants to reach new people, he must also be out and about with people gently and respectfully interacting and telling the amazing story of why he is planting a church.

### **Sunday Space**

Most of our church plants will start with a rented office space that is also large enough to accommodate forty or fifty people for a Team Meeting and for the Series. Sunday services generally meet in “Sunday only” leased space in a convention center, hotel conference room, or nice school auditorium. You need a main room that will hold at least 100 to 150 people in theater-style seating and still have room for a stage area, aisles, and space to socialize. It also should be “high end” enough to feel attractive to people coming in; they should not feel that “this church must be really hurting if this is all they could rent.” In addition, you need space for children’s classes that feels safe and is reasonably near to the main room. Parking, visibility, signage placement, permission for coffee/donuts, and accessibility from campus are other issues to consider. In addition to all of this, it can be challenging to find space that is available most Sundays. If you are displaced more than three

or four times a year, it's probably too much (and you need a reasonable alternative for those Sundays).

The issue of size is important because of the need for critical mass. Ideally, you can get at least 150 people in the auditorium of your leased space (that means having about 180 seats filled to 80%). Then you can grow up to 150 or 160 people before going to two services; this means that you would have seventy-five or eighty people in each service if you had an even balance. There is a tension between not getting lost in too large a space when the church is small and having enough room for the church to grow in the same space for the first couple of years. I would prefer a larger space that needs to be set up creatively to make it not feel so empty when you're starting. This gives you have plenty of room to grow with one service so that you can have critical mass to add a second when it's time.

Once the church reaches 200 to 300 people, you need to be seriously looking at more permanent space for lease or purchase. Given economic conditions, for most churches this means leasing 12,000 to 18,000 square feet of warehouse space and remodeling it into a church facility. When we planted Vine, we purchased land and built a 12,000-square-foot building when the church was around 100 people. And there was plenty of land to expand as the church grew. But in the financial climate of 1998, banks were very willing to loan us the money. Currently, it's nearly impossible to obtain a loan without a significant down payment and a proven financial history. So for most churches, there will be an intermediate step of getting a three to five year lease for the church to grow to 500 or 600 people (we've been in leased space for six years currently at Blue Sky, and it looks like it will be a minimum of two more years). Leasing more permanent space too early can put the church in a tight a financial situation, but waiting too long can slow growth by not

providing a more stable environment where more “settlers” and families will risk trying the church. How and when you make these types of decisions are based on finances, the rate of growth, and the availability of property to lease or purchase in the community where the church is located.

## **Network of Churches**

With seven churches committed together as I write this, it doesn't take a lot to connect us together. We don't have complicated systems and authority structures. We are seven local churches originating out of Vine Church. We love each other and, as lead pastors, we are dear friends. At this point we are held together by these Christian relationships and our love for Jesus. We didn't set about to start something great; Jesus simply told us that we had to become a network of church-planting churches.

### **Replicable Model**

One of the most important challenges that we face is the great need to replicate healthy, local churches. When we were first starting, I felt Jesus' direction to come up with a replicable model—a way of doing church that is thoroughly Biblical and that works in reaching our world culture. I need to say again that the model is not the life—it is simply the structure that supports the life. The Holy Spirit glorifying Jesus, who was crucified and raised from the dead, is the life. It is, “Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Colossians 1:28). We shouldn't make too much of the model or the structure itself.

None of us stand in awe of the 2x4 studs in the walls of our houses—we never much notice them unless we're adding on or repairing the structure. But they are important! Still, none of us would think that the house's structure is the family, and we would all agree that a building with no one living in it is not really a home. The structure is unimportant if there is no Holy Spirit life in the church; it is dead. But if life is in the preaching, leading, groups, worship, Series, Team Meeting,

etc., the structure allows a safe context for the life to flourish. If we just implement the model out of dead routine, there is no hope that the result will be a healthy, church-planting, local church. The replicable model is not the life; the structure provides a safe place for Christian life to be experienced.

We share much in common with this replicable model. Our values in the Sunday service, how we do small groups and discipleship communities, manuals for the Series, purpose of our Team Meetings, and on and on. We want to hit the mark in how a disciple-making local church can organize itself so that each church planter is not trying to figure it out on his own. We do not encourage our planters to ask, “What kind of church should I plant?” The Bible has settled that and having a clear structure supporting the life of the church allows the planter to move on to “prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4), knowing “nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). So we agree on the basic structure of the local church and always ask the question, when considering implementing something new, “Is this replicable in all of the churches?”

I constantly consider the issue of replicability in my approach to preaching. The question is not “Can I do it well with this approach?” Rather, it is “Can I teach many new preachers to do it this way?” Is it replicable? Some pastors have photographic memories and can preach from a memorized script, but most can’t. Even if I had such a memory, which I don’t, I would choose a simple outline drawn from the text itself. Why? Most anyone called to preach can use that approach and become an effective preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is replicable. So we ask this question with everything we do as a network.

Recently Vine has been talking about how they help the poor as a larger church. They could approach it from one of two perspectives. One is, as a large church, deciding what they can do that would be effective in helping the poor. But the second goes further. How can they develop an approach to effectively help the poor that will work in any university city where we plant churches? Coming up with a simple model for larger churches in the network will allow Vine to have a much wider influence in ministering to those in need and keep other local churches from having to figure it out on their own. So they are in process of working on this replicable model for helping the poor.

### **Network Relationships**

Because we are a very small group of churches, leadership structures are very simple. I lead the vision and direction of the network. But, as I've always functioned in local churches, I do not make any major decisions without seeking the wisdom and counsel of the Godly men that Jesus has put alongside me. As with our local boards, nearly all decisions are made by consensus (i.e., we come to agreement before making major decisions). It's not that we are a democracy; we never vote on issues. We are friends and co-workers that share a common purpose and mission. It's not hard for us, with mutual love and respect, to prayerfully come to decisions together.

We meet together in our "Lead Pastor Meetings" every other month for two days at one of the churches. In addition, our lead pastor retreat is held in May at Blue Sky and the annual Summer Conference at Vine is held in June. We have a lead pastor and wives retreat every September, and we are just in the process of adding a biannual all pastor retreat for training staff pastors. All of these gatherings give us the opportunity to pray together, encourage each other, cast vision for the churches, and train pastors. Our relationships grow, and we strengthen one another when we are

together. The details of our meeting together will certainly change as we grow in number, but the purpose will remain the same: planting healthy, local churches that make disciples for Jesus!

One last thing: We have all agreed as lead pastors that there is a church size that is too big. We do not want to grow mega-churches, where people file in and out not having relationships. There is a size where the administrative and organizational challenges overshadow the healthy functioning of the church. I summarize it this way: I would rather have two churches of 1,500 people than one church of 3,000. We believe that the loss of relationships as a church gets too large diminish the ability make disciples in the way that we should. When a church reaches somewhere around 2,000 people, we would like to multiply the church by planting another local church in the same or a nearby city. While we've not yet done this, thinking through the issue is important for future planning. We don't need superstar pastors to keep the church together. We don't want to continue to build larger and more expensive facilities to accommodate huge crowds. Doing multi-site churches where the lead pastor is piped in via video feed is not our idea of how to most effectively do local church. Why not identify, train, and release another called lead pastor to build up another local church? This opens up many new opportunities for disciples to serve (double the lead pastors, additional staff pastors, another worship leader, etc.). At the same time, we do not want to be critical of those who want larger churches or multi-site approaches. They are responsible to Jesus for what they do and we simply cannot see ourselves effectively taking such approaches.

### **Last Thoughts**

As I get older, I am humbled at how many times I have been wrong in my life. In ten years, I will probably need to rewrite most of this and confess all of my short-sightedness. This network of local churches is a work in progress. The changes that Jesus has accomplished in us in the past six



years since we started the network are dramatic. He has corrected our theology, our attitudes, and our practices. And I'm pretty sure he is not done yet! I thank Jesus that he will not leave us as we are. I am not a theologian; I am a practitioner. We declare Jesus crucified and risen from the dead. We are servants of Jesus Christ, imperfect in so many ways. He has saved us by His shocking grace, not because of any goodness or promise that he saw in us...just because he is Lord and he decided to do so for His own glory. He alone is good, and he alone is completely right. So forgive us for all of the areas where we are weak and immature. Pray for us that Jesus would give us grace and favor that somehow our lives might matter in His mighty purpose of salvation in our day and time.

I've been thinking on this verse lately: "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever" (1 Peter 1:24). And John the Baptist's confession regarding Jesus: "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven....He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:27; 30). We are nothing apart from Jesus. Any small part he allows us to play in this great purpose of His is amazing. Whatever he has determined for us to do in these days, we will do. We simply desire to keep our heads down and obey Jesus to the end. "To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (Ephesians 3:21).

## **Appendix**

### **Christian Biographies worth Reading**

#### **1500's—Reformation Period**

“Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther” by Roland H. Bainton

“John Calvin: Man of the Millennium” by Philip Vollmer & Wesley Strackbein

“For Kirk and Covenant: The Stalwart Courage of John Knox” by Douglas Wilson

#### **1700's—Great Awakening**

“George Whitefield: The life and times of the great evangelist of the 18<sup>th</sup> century revival” by Arnold Dallimore (2 volume—not the single volume version)

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### **1800's and 1900's**

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“Revival and Revivalism” by Iain H. Murray (covers evangelical events from 1750-1858)

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