

Mission Observer

New Life through New Leaders A Vision for Replanting in a Changing Culture

Aaron Putnam and Dawit Bokre

The following Mission Observer summarizes the presentation by Rev. Aaron Putnam and Rev. Dawit Bokre at the annual Lutheran Society for Missiology banquet. The complete video presentation is online at <https://www.LSFM.global>

The Good Shepherd Story

In 2010, Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Hayward, California, was a congregation running out of time—Aging. Anglo. Faithful, but fading. The neighborhood had changed around them. The streets, schools, and corner stores told a new story: immigrants, working families, second-generation young people navigating life between two worlds. The congregation had a heart for the Gospel and a genuine love for their community. What they lacked was relational access and cultural credibility with the very people God had placed right outside their doors.

So, they made a decision that would change everything. They stopped waiting for the right leader to arrive and started trusting the leaders God had already sent. The first leader came from outside the Bay Area, from St. Louis mostly, though not long before his call he had been living in Guatemala—so in a sense, he came the long way.



Rev. Aaron Putnam serves as the San Francisco Bay Area Director of LINC Ministries International, a strategic urban network that empowers local missionary leaders, and partners with them for kingdom impact.



Rev. Dawit Bokre serves as Senior Pastor at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Hayward, CA, a unique multiethnic congregation, and as Director of Mission for LINC Bay Area.

Aaron Putnam grew up in a household shaped by calling and constant movement. His father began as a scientist, then became a seminarian, then a church planter, and eventually a parish pastor. The family moved with him through every transition, living in different cities and contexts across the country. That upbringing gave Aaron something rare: the ability to feel at home almost anywhere, and an instinct for mission that was formed not in a classroom but on the road.

He became a teacher, and after several years teaching high school in the United States, Aaron felt the pull toward something more. He traveled to Guatemala, where he spent more than five years teaching at a school, doing mission work, and building deep relationships within several Lutheran churches there. It was in Guatemala that he met the love of his life, Sofia, a Guatemalan woman and adult convert to the Lutheran faith. When they returned to the States, and Aaron completed his seminary studies, he was called to Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Hayward to plant a Spanish-speaking ministry.

But Aaron did not just plant a ministry. He read the room.

He noticed that Hayward's population, though largely Latino and immigrant, was primarily English-speaking among the second and "one point five" generations. These were people who had grown up in the United States, who preferred English, and who did not fit neatly into a traditional Spanish language ministry model. He noticed the long-tenured lead pastor graciously stepping toward retirement, creating space for new leadership to emerge. And he noticed what the life of the congregation already revealed: Good Shepherd was on the downside of the curve, and something had to change.

So, Aaron began the hard work of guiding the congregation toward replanting, not as an institutional strategy, but as a genuine act of missional courage. He led the Spanish ministry. He shepherded the declining English congregation. He studied with the people, prayed with them, and helped them see that their story was not over; it simply needed a new beginning.

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Around that same time, a nineteen-year-old man from Eritrea showed up at Good Shepherd's door. His name was Dawit Bokre. He had no formal ministry training, no institutional credentials, and no roadmap. What he had was a vision: to gather Eritrean Lutherans in the Bay Area and plant a community rooted in the Gospel. Good Shepherd gave him a classroom to start meeting. Aaron gave him something far more valuable: brotherhood, mentorship, and years of intentional investment.

Aaron saw in Dawit what the institution had not yet learned to see: a leader already embedded in the community he was called to reach, already trusted by the people he was called to serve, already fluent in the cultural and relational language of his neighbors. Rather than sending him away to be formed elsewhere, Aaron walked alongside him, helping him pursue formal theological education (through Concordia

Seminary's Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology [EIIT]), guiding him into LCMS ordination, and weaving the growing Eritrean ministry into the larger vision of what Good Shepherd could become.

By 2016, Good Shepherd was home to a Spanish-speaking ministry, an Eritrean ministry, an Oromo ministry from the Ethiopian community, and a "rebuilding" English congregation, all under one roof, all in various stages of growth and connection.

When the time came to discern who should lead the replanted congregation as its officially called pastor, the answer was clear. Under Aaron's leadership, the congregation looked at the young Eritrean man who had grown up among them, with his community relationships, his outreach capacity, his ability to raise young leaders and build strategic partnerships.

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church called the Rev. Dawit Bokre. What followed was not a church growth strategy. It was resurrection.

How is God calling us to be faithful as His Church right now, in our particular time and place?

Every congregation, at some point, is forced to reckon with this fundamental question.

Faithfulness to Word and Sacrament remains constant. How we live that out in a changing context requires ongoing discernment.

Not what worked a generation ago. Not what other churches are doing. Not what preserves the institution.

But *how*, honestly, faithfully, courageously, is God calling us right now, in this place, to be His Church? There are three honest answers to that question. Basically, there are three callings, three pathways forward. The health of the Church in North America depends on congregations having the clarity and courage to name which one is theirs.

Calling One: Plant

For churches with health, momentum, and resources, the most faithful thing you can do is not consolidate your success but reproduce it.

Calling Two: Replant

For churches experiencing decline but still holding resources and leaders, the mission is not over. It needs a new beginning.

Calling Three: A Blessed Ending

For churches whose season is complete, the most faithful act is to steward their legacy forward so that death becomes seed.

The Reality We Must Face: Mission begins with truthful seeing.

Culturally, the United States is becoming more urbanized, more diverse, more unaffiliated, and more distrustful of institutions, including the church. The Bay Area makes this visible. It is diverse, expensive, and the least churchd major metro area in

the country. If we want to understand the future of mission, we must understand places like this.

This is not just a church problem. It is a leadership pipeline problem.

The Shift We Must Make: From importing outside leaders to empowering local ones.

The traditional model places leaders into communities where they are often outsiders. But the leaders already present, those who know the people, speak the language, and carry trust are often overlooked. The turning point is entrustment. Not delegation, but entrustment. Delegation assigns tasks. Entrustment shares mission.

The Leaders We Must Raise: Not just more leaders. The right leaders.

Leaders who are local, embedded, relationally connected, already present in the mission field.

Leaders who feel at home in diversity, who navigate complexity and build bridges.

Leaders of character, rooted in Christ, humble, teachable, persistent, and relationally magnetic. Leaders who multiply mission, raising up others and building teams.

Leaders who create pathways that sustain mission over time.

And leaders who are supported well.

Raising these leaders means praying consistently, walking closely, coaching practically, encouraging openly, and *entrusting* continually.

The Closing Call

We bring you the story of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church and its experience in replanting with a leader from within to bear witness to what God does when His Church is willing to be honest and courageous. Mission history is not primarily about institutions. It is about entrustment.

The question is this: Do our systems actually support entrustment, or quietly resist it?

The task before us is not better strategies, but clearer missional imagination. We must recognize, form, and trust the leaders God is already raising up. Therefore, we need to intentionally identify, raise up, and entrust local, embedded leaders within our own congregations and communities. This will require renewed courage to see what we have overlooked, to trust where we have hesitated, and to follow where God is already at work. The future of our shared mission may depend on it.