

A Church Planting Journey

What I saw will stick with me for the rest of my life

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Abstract: In 2007, the North American Mission Board surveyed over 1,000 church plants and found some significant results in regards to the success of new church plants. It was found that when a church planter received leadership development training within a church plant, their odds of survivability when they plant increased by over 250%. When the church planter was mentored to have realistic expectations of what the church planting process would be like, the odds of survivability increased over 400%!¹ In this paper, I tracked my training and found that the key to effective church planting is having an unyielding focus on mission and vision.

It's difficult to think of a more perfect word to describe the image of church planting than "sexy." It combines so many characteristics that surround the popular opinion: it's enticing, exciting, and glamorous. This is the place where the thinking is outside the box. Church plants are all about trying new approaches to communicating the Gospel to the world. The results are powerful testimonies, new believers baptized, and entire communities impacted with works of justice and mercy. Who wouldn't be attracted to that? Certainly I was, and it led me to Knoxville, Tennessee, on a one-year church plant internship with The Point Church.

It happened on a Saturday night while sitting in the back storage room of a movie theatre that I found myself counting hundreds of pens and becoming slightly amused. There's nothing sexy about counting pens in a back storage room. At this moment in my internship, I was faced with an incredible internal conflict that threatened to bring any future church planting interest to an immediate stop. Why am I doing this? Pastor Matt Peeples (my supervising pastor for the internship and lead pastor at The Point) has plenty of ready, willing, and eager leaders at The Point who would come to the church storage area and count pens; yet he asked me to go and do this menial task. As much as it could be an exercise in humility, there was something much deeper and much more vital that was happening here in this moment of tedious pen counting. In this moment, I had two options: The most obvious is to just get through it. Count the pens as fast as I can, try not to be bitter about it, and move on to the next thing. But what I've found looking back is that there was a second option

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that was there the entire time, working in me and building behind the scenes. This option was to have a clear focus on the mission of The Point—“Connecting the disconnected to a growing and reproducing relationship with Christ.” This option looks at the pens and sees them for what they could be: a chance to connect someone who is disconnected from Jesus.

The next Sunday was a big Impact Sunday for The Point Church. Hundreds of people were going to be given a pen with a card attached during service that they would use to fill out information about going deeper in faith and service. The data that resulted from this service included pages of names and contact information from people who wanted to grow in faith by joining a Connection Group or who were interested in serving on an Impact Team. Some wanted more information about Jesus, and others desired baptism. The next week was spent making these phone calls and connecting with people for hours each day. Having in mind a clear focus on our mission made counting pens vital. Because I counted pens, people joined groups, served on teams, and connected with a pastor to learn more about Jesus and God used those conversations to bring people to Him in baptism. With that in mind, how could I not count these pens?

The difference between option one and option two is a solid and sold-out focus on mission and vision. Without a clear picture of the mission and vision, counting pens is a task that probably isn't worth my time or the money that's paying my salary. But counting pens led me to the question: “Why am I doing this?” And as that question led me to the mission and the focus on “Connecting the disconnected,” counting pens became the most important thing I could be doing at that moment.

The church plant internship has been vital in that I've had the opportunity to walk through a year of what it's like to plant a church. The Point's being a portable church meant I had no office space or building to go to as a “home base.” The freedom of going wherever I want to do whatever I want is one of those “sexy” aspects that actually lead more toward paranoia than any sort of glamour. I was constantly faced with internal questions: “Am I doing what I'm supposed to be doing?” “Am I making the best use of my time and money?” “Am I cut out for this?” What I've found in talks with other church planters is that they, too, have struggled with this feeling their first year. They are forced to imagine a church that doesn't yet exist and to communicate that vision to people who aren't on board yet. A strong focus on mission is what keeps those nagging questions from becoming any more than that. Keeping your mission at the forefront allows you to use it to filter your actions and your schedule. Spending the first few weeks learning the city, finding a place to “office” regularly, and exploring regular spots to play and meet people became a vital part of my job if my focus was on the mission to “connect the disconnected.”

Mission informs Model

Part of my regular routine with Pastor Matt was a weekly one-on-one time where we could process experiences and questions related to the internship and church planting in general. Pastor Matt was inundated at the beginning with questions from me that related to doctrine and practice: worship practices, communion practices, baptisms...all your typical seminarian theological inquiries. What I have realized more and more looking back is that the questions weren't wrong as much as the assumptions behind the questions. I came with my assumptions that what we were doing at The Point was wrong and needed to know how Pastor Matt justifies it. This is because I was so caught up in models and their practice that I had missed a very important concept: *mission informs model*. Simon Sinek put on a TED talk about this very concept and constantly emphasized looking at "the why behind the what."

The "what" that's easy to focus on are the practices we see. We see churches being missional communities, having dynamic worship bands, or trying different methods of distributing communion, and these are the things on which we focus. In these one-on-one meetings, I was definitely focusing on models, and it was reflected in my questions. My questions were usually returned with a frustrating, albeit thought provoking, second question: "Why do you think we do this?" This caused me to put myself in the place of pastor/church planter and ask myself "why?" This type of processing was slow and repetitive, but that's exactly what one needs when it comes to capturing a mission-focused heart. It doesn't happen overnight and it can be incredibly frustrating. But what began to happen was that my eyes were opened up to the importance and single-minded focus on the mission of the church driving absolutely everything we do.

In his book *The Advantage*, Patrick Lencioni mentions the importance of mission being more than a weekend retreat that leads to a plaque we hang on the wall of the office. A mission is more than several sentences of buzzwords that nobody can remember. Mission is an orientation of the heart that drives everything we say and do, as well as everything we choose not to do. I saw this at The Point clearly. The simple mission of "Connecting the disconnected to a growing and reproducing relationship with Christ" was on the heart of anybody who spent time with this community.

Shortly after I arrived at The Point, I was approached by some regular attenders who asked for some of our promotional materials to distribute at a party they were going to at their apartment complex. Nobody had asked them to do this, and there was no plan or intention of any staff to be there. I was amazed at how excited they were to be set free to do this type of outreach on their own. This is what a strong emphasis on mission does. It sets God's people free when they can simply ask themselves: "Will this connect disconnected people?" This is the filter they are able to use to make the best use of their time, energy, and passion.

This was also a very freeing concept for me throughout my church plant internship as I really began to grasp the primacy of mission. The confusion and the stress of not knowing if I am in the place I am supposed to be or doing what I'm supposed to be doing was mitigated by this mission filter. Is this coffee shop the best place to do my office work during the week? I am meeting new people, having conversations that build relationships and lead to spiritual conversations. This environment can lead to connecting disconnected people, and so I am definitely in the right place and doing the right thing.

The idea of “mission before model” eventually led into how I process my time and activities here at The Point. If sacramental theology is a question I have, a mission before model attitude doesn't ask: “Why do we do communion this way?” Instead, it asks “If our mission is to connect disconnected people to a growing and reproducing relationship with Christ, how can we faithfully distribute the Sacrament in order to do this?” This attitude also helped greatly with the earlier story about counting pens. An attitude of mission helped me to see the potential in counting pens for a service that was designed to connect disconnected people and help connected people to grow deeper. At that moment, there's nothing else I would want to do than to be a part of preparing for an extremely important worship experience.

As I prepare to move forward as a church planter, I often get asked: “What kind of church are you going to plant? Are you going to be attractional like The Point? Are you going to do missional communities?” The question is the same I was asking a year ago, and I might have had an even better idea of a model a year ago. But now my answer is a much more ambiguous, yet confident: “I'm not quite sure yet exactly how it's going to look.” This is because I want to focus in 100% on my mission and vision. This is because no matter where I end up, if I have a solid mission and vision I will be able to read my culture and ask how the mission can best be carried out in this place. The great benefit of putting the mission before the model is that if a particular model is not looking to be effective it does not mean we've failed. It just means we go back to the drawing board and look at how to better implement the mission and vision. The time spent here soaking in the attitude of mission before model has helped me to be equipped to plant a church in any context to which God sends me. I can learn or develop whatever model that seems to fit best, but what will always come first is the mission of connecting people to Christ and equipping Christians to do the same.

Mission is Constructive

The most common evaluation I have of my time thus far at seminary is that it has taught me to deconstruct absolutely everything to find the theological nuances present. This is not an inherently negative thing. It keeps us from becoming too infatuated with ideas and concepts that arise in the culture of Christian conferences and literature. We can pick out the theological traps present in models, materials, and

music. The problem is when we are simply left in an environment of deconstructing. It leaves us empty and with no answers regarding how to engage with a changing culture and context. What I've found through my church plant training and internship is that mission is constructive and has become an essential part of my formation process. Through my theological training, I am more than capable of identifying the problems with the actions, attitudes, and spiritual health of a community. I could talk about where churches are lacking and how in some ways they are flat-out wrong in what they're doing. The problem came when I would ask myself "What would you do differently?" I never felt prepared to answer that question. I knew some good stock answers that might help me out in a church planter assessment interview, but when it came to actually starting and leading a community of people as the local church, I was lacking.

The time spent at The Point, observing and soaking in the centrality of mission and vision, has helped me to see and learn how to construct. Critiquing poor theology should never be the end point, but instead I can ask what would best connect disconnected people and then look to my vision to begin creating a system to do so. At The Point, our vision is "Experience. Connect. Reflect." The system begins with disconnected people experiencing God. This happens through worship experiences, connection groups, word of mouth, and paid advertising. By intentionally focusing on the "Experience" aspect of vision, I can begin working on and creating opportunities for disconnected people to enter into the system that the Holy Spirit will use to connect them. As people experience God, the Holy Spirit will move them to faith and they will desire to "Connect" (the second part of the vision). How can I create groups, service opportunities, networking between people, etc., that will best lead to people connecting? This is a question that is constructive and it comes from an attitude of mission/vision centrality.

I've heard The Point labeled as an attractional church. If I'm honest, I've labeled it that way myself when I first came out. This comes from an attitude of deconstruction, which looks at only the worship experience (band, movie theater, message series, etc.) and radio advertising but misses the heart of the church. The Point would be much better labeled as "incarnational." We speak the language of the culture and do our best to eliminate as many barriers as possible for people to "experience" God. We do some events and some advertising that attracts, but the rest speaks to our context. Furthermore, as people experience and connect to God for the first time, they tend to catch the mission and vision better than anyone else and become the best cheerleaders for the Gospel out in the community. A radio ad and praise band might attract someone, dynamic preaching might even get them to come back, but it's a church community that's sold out to mission and vision that incarnates itself in Knoxville that defines The Point and has built it into what it is today. This is the attitude and the heart that I will carry with me moving forward. Knowing the importance and seeing the benefit of a heart completely centered on

mission and vision will lead me to prayerfully and earnestly seek out the heart of God and how He is equipping me to carry out the Great Commission by starting a new church somewhere. When I first came out to The Point, I was interested in church planting because it was popular and everyone said I should do it. After being saturated in mission and vision, I cannot imagine myself doing anything but planting a church that is sold out to the mission and vision of God in its local community context.

Seasoned church planting veterans warned me as I began this internship that I had better be careful about getting involved in church planting. They said “It will wreck you Andy.” I see now how right they were. The stories I’ve seen and heard here of people connecting to Jesus who never would have imagined they could be welcomed in a church have wrecked me. I’ve seen the Holy Spirit working powerfully here to bring people to faith and back to faith. I’ve seen what the Holy Spirit is doing, and I’ve had a taste of what He’s capable of accomplishing through the local church planted in a community, and I know I need to be a part of that.

Endnotes

¹ Edward Stetzer and Warren Bird, “The State of Church Planting in the United States: Research Overview and Qualitative Study of Primary Church Planting Entities,” North American Mission Board, 1 Jan. 2007, accessed 13 May 2014, <http://www.namb.net/WorkArea/linkit.aspx?LinkIdentifier=id&ItemID=8590117117&libID=8590117116>.