

PLANTING IN ALL SEASONS: PERSONAL REFLECTION

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INTRODUCTION

The 'gateway to the north', Edmonton, Alberta, Canada is the northernmost metropolis of around one million people in the world. Growing up here, the city had a 'small town' feel. As a child, I could go a month without hearing a car horn, the American pop culture trends were popular here at least six months after they had gone out of fashion south of us and seeing people experiencing homelessness was completely foreign to me. In addition, to see someone who looked different, I had only to look in a mirror, as I was the only Filipino in my school. Today, Edmonton is a diverse and growing city, Tagalog is the third most spoken language behind English and French, over fifteen thousand international students temporarily migrate to here annually, and encountering panhandlers is a common occurrence whether in the downtown core or far-removed suburb. In just over a decade, Edmonton has changed rapidly, and with change, there is a tremendous need and opportunity for the Good News.

"The pandemic wrote the menu!" said the small business owner of an Edmonton restaurant to me, who due to the global pandemic adjusted his menu and rebranded (from 'the Local Omnivore' to 'Gravy'). He further explained that in order to meet the needs of a community that relied on food but could no longer consume it as they had been, not only did his method of delivery and staffing model have to change, but also his menu. And while the essence of his menu remained, he needed to tailor it in a way that would meet the needs of the people he was trying to connect to.

During these past couple years, various studies have been released illustrating the challenges and effects of COVID-19 on our global society. Regardless of geography or station in life, the pandemic has affected how people work, gather, speak, and relate to one another. For many churches, this meant expanded digital services. According to Lifeway Research, prior to COVID-19, *"only around 1 in 4 (27%) [of Protestant pastors surveyed] said they livestreamed either the entire service or just the sermon."* In their more recent study at the height of the pandemic in early 2021, Lifeway found that *"85% of Protestant churchgoers said their congregation offered livestreamed worship services, and 76% said their church posted a video of the worship service to watch later. Additionally, 53% of churchgoers said they watched online worship services at their church more in 2020 than in 2019, while 21% said they watched more online services at a different church in 2020."* In other words, the pandemic has affected how the church

connects with people, while simultaneously changing how people connect with local churches.

Furthermore, while churches enjoyed an initial boost in reach (through online delivery), recent studies challenge the quality of those connections. Christianity Today, reported that *"according to data collected in April and May 2020 by Barna Group, one in three practicing Christians dropped out of church completely at the beginning of COVID-19. Moreover, church membership in the US dropped below 50 percent for the first time in 2020, according to Gallup data dating back to 1940."*

In Canada, these statistics have been practically observed by many. Here, the issues of change and rapid decline are not new, although they have been greatly exacerbated during the pandemic. In an April 2022 report by Global News, they affirmed the growing trend in Canada of the fastest growing religious classification being the 'nones' or non-believers (19% or 1 in 5 Canadians), while the largest religious group (46%) identified as 'spiritually uncertain'. Significantly, the Angus Reid study they reported on found that among those surveyed, *"Evangelical Christianity – which encompasses dozens of denominations such as Baptist, Pentecostal and Mennonite – was the only religion seen as more damaging than beneficial by every other self-identified religious group."*

Personally, in my corner of the world in Edmonton, Canada, pandemic restrictions sparked great debate over the integrity and obligation of the church to meet together physically. Some local churches made international headlines claiming 'persecution' and encouraging active defiance of local governance as a moral, ethical, and spiritual responsibility of the Christian church. These arguments brought to the fore the efficacy of the local church in my context, bringing to the surface further questions not solely of method of delivery but also the essence of what the church is offering. During this generational season of rapid change and decline, many are asking 'how can the church connect with people in a society where the church is seemingly and exceedingly disconnected?'

DISCIPLES EAT TOGETHER

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... 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.

- ESV, Ac 2:42,46-47

In 2015, I started working as a Pastor for Young Adults, and it was my belief that if people were educated, exposed, and experienced in mission they would naturally take the next steps in full-time Kingdom service and ministry. For three years, we intentionally pursued active mission engagement. We went on a couple short term mission trips (both nationally and internationally), many of the core group of 40 joined mission ventures through work in inner-city Edmonton, while some joined other missions' organizations for their own mission trips. This group met for weekly fellowship, Bible study and inner-city mission serving people experiencing homelessness by delivering hot dogs (rain, snow, or shine). After three years of experiencing numerical growth and emphasizing missional living, I was convicted by the importance and impact of mission when the hearts of the people serving were challenged to be further focused and aligned to the heart of Jesus. In the summer of 2018, we embarked on a study and reflection on heart and purity issues, which saw (over the course of five weeks) the attendance dramatically decline to under 5 people (and never recover).

This experience caused me to reflect on 'the menu'. As a church leader, 'what were we offering?' I reflected on three things: presence, community, and burnout. And after a year of honest reflection, I concluded that while we were connecting with people, the essence of that connection – Jesus, was not primary (as I had believed), but rather secondary to missional service. This led people not to a richness of abiding resulting in bearing "much fruit" but instead an abundance of human endeavor, utilitarian relationships, and obligatory programming.

The summer of 2019 (pre-pandemic) after intentionally discerning and prayerfully asking 'how can our community meet Jesus in a more profound, genuine, and powerful way?' we started a monthly gathering focused on facilitating an intentional yet simple atmosphere that initiated intimate fellowship, free worship, and authoritative prayer. This was centred around the person of Jesus and the exercise of communion (typically through a potluck meal). In January of 2021 (mid-pandemic) this monthly fellowship began meeting weekly online, incorporating as a church in September, and was recognized as church plant (of the SEND Network) one month later. We named this gathering, Supper Club.

PREPARING FOR PRESENCE (BEFORE POWER)

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.

- ESV, Jo 6:35

'How do I do that?' or "I don't hear anything" were common responses from people when I had asked them to discern and ask the Holy Spirit for direction.

Seldomly, some would say that they didn't believe the Holy Spirit spoke to people directly, however, in this was a more common response than "I believe God is 'telling' me..." I must admit, that for the majority of my life as a PK (or pastor's kid) and now a pastor, these were my responses too. My prayer life was akin to picking up a cup on a string, speaking into it, putting it to my ear to hear a response, and frequently hearing nothing. This resulted in me pulling on the string to check if the connection was working. Unfortunately, for many in the churches I have encountered this lack of confidence is sadly common. In my experience, the vast majority of prayers I heard were desires for an exhibition of God's power, but lacked an equally, if not significantly greater fervor for God's presence.

The summer of 2021 was a historically dry and hot season in Edmonton. The weather fluctuated from extraordinarily hot to unbearably smoky (due to forest fires hundreds of kilometres away). At the beginning of July 2021, the provincial government revised restrictions allowing for Supper Club to finally meet in-person. However, the challenge was to meet indoors was to reduce the potential size of the gathering by two-thirds of occupancy typically allowed. After prayerful consideration, we decided on a mobile gathering, meeting outdoors in a different backyard or park, which would migrate week to week. Interestingly, the Sunday afternoons we would gather for fellowship regularly called for inclement weather leading up to and including our fellowship time. On one particular occasion that forecasted rain, our people began to pray for "good weather" or "no rain". The prayer was rooted in the idea that 'preferred weather' would lead to a more impactful gathering. Challenged by this, we began to pray a prayer of surrender, that regardless of the weather (rain or shine), what we wanted most was God's presence, and the resulting weather was delightful. On another occasion, a local advisory for smoke inhalation was lifted to a suitable amount a couple hours before our fellowship. Another time, while meeting in a busy centrally located park, the sky darkened for a moment, and began to rain heavily (forcing strangers into the gazebo we were worshipping in). It felt like an Old Testament story, as the rain literally fell around us, stopping in a line literally only several meters away. When the days looked too hot, the weather cooled in time, or when it looked gloomy, the weather warmed. Week after week, from July to October, we were never forced indoors due to weather, and from prioritizing God's presence, we began to experience and grow in awareness of His power.

In John 15, Jesus' disciples are encouraged to abide in Christ. The place of abiding is where fruit manifests, and that apart from him, we can "do nothing". As a disciple, how much do we really believe that? I understand, that anything of significance requires Jesus, but truly, I can do 'something'. Apart from Jesus, we can do nothing! Not even hear. As a pastor,

many times I had been called or asked to pray for people in the congregation. From dedicating cars or career direction to improved health or new homes, the vast majority of prayer was in relation to these. Rarely did church-goers pray for the manifest presence of God in their homes, work, or relationships, and so it should have been of little surprise to me that people did not have confidence to speak to the Holy Spirit themselves. As a Church, are we preparing for presence (before power)? If not, is it any surprise that the fastest growing belief (in Canada) among those who grew up in churches is that God does not exist, and if he does, he is not within earshot of people.

As a community, we have been prioritizing intentional stillness. Adopting a posture of humility, our goal has been to be in God's presence and stay there. The idea is that if we are to partake in meaningful mission, it'll be God's initiatives and not our own. In a practical way, the extent of our 'church programs' has been prayer. Through a divine appointment, our church was provided a mentor to teach us to pray. Dr. David Chotka of Spirit Equip Ministries taught a weekly class on discernment, partnering with us to teach the Lord's Prayer to fifty-nine individuals, representing eight different churches, from three denominations. After this, we invested in three months of weekly meetings to re-learn how to pray (taking the Transform! Prayer Course). Furthermore, the initial members of the church have all read or been to Soul Care conferences, having at least an introduction to deliverance ministry. We believe, that in order to pursue God, we must learn how to hear from him first.

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By prioritizing listening to the Holy Spirit, we've intentionally addressed and surrendered many corporate and individual barriers to Kingdom advancement. Throughout the year, the corporate practice of prayer walking led us throughout the city. And through these times of prayer led Supper Club to divine appointments, opening doors to move in and acquire its current location, and growth its pastoral team. We are learning to trust God in new ways, and to be comfortable being still in His presence.

A DATA-INFORMED (NOT INTENDED) MENU

Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him

and said, "This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves." But Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They said to him, "We have only five loaves here and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

- ESV, Mt 14:15-21

From the creation account in Genesis to the New Jerusalem in Revelation, the Bible shares data. As churches, we are encouraged to gather data before we embark on a task. And yet, the extent to which churches gather and communicate data is limited to monthly finances, Sunday attendance or membership, and professions of faith. While this data is useful, it only highlights one part of the story. Imagine, the feeding account without either knowing that 5000 people were fed, or that the initial meal was from five loaves and two fish? The story and its impact would be incomplete, understanding only that God feeds a lot or they didn't start with much. We would be limited to apprehend that God feeds abundantly from a meager initial offering, when offered in thanksgiving to God and service to others. Likewise, when churches limit data to 'bucks, butts, and baptisms', it fails to encourage further action and instead rewards established behaviour based on how much they give rather than the joy of their worship, their weekly commitment rather than their daily witness, and their initial decisions rather than their growth as disciple makers.

In a Disciple Making Study of US churches in March 2020, Exponential and Grey Matter Research found that 73% of all churches had either plateaued or were in statistical decline, 27% of churches reported short-term growth through programs, while only 5% of churches were "part of numerically growing churches... also characterized as churches that are reproducing disciples and disciple making". 5% of churches "weren't even scored because no one in their church was making disciples".

Discipleship.org defines: a disciple making movement - "through gospel activity, that has abundant fruit among the lost, that multiplies these disciples (people growing in obedience to all of Jesus' commands), who in turn replicate themselves in others, so that we can see at least four generations regularly produced in multiple streams of disciple-making activity and these streams multiply consistently into churches."

As a Church, what are we counting? How are we

reporting it? And is it having the intended impact? Meaning, if we were to gather data based on what we wanted to accomplish, are we actually doing it? Oftentimes, faith leaders are reluctant to collect or communicate data, insisting that the value they are providing cannot be counted as they are intangible and not measurable. Leaders without measurables, is to take people on a journey without a destination. To steward without accountability, is to risk resources without development. And finally, as the body of Christ without a tangible purpose, is to engage hunger without feeding the hungry. Churches have a responsibility to not only gather data but communicate it in a way that encourages forward progress, inspired to give God thanks and motivated to serve the community God has placed us in.

Prior to launching weekly gatherings, we used data to not only further understand and strategize connection points in the community but also to begin praying for the individuals and families in our target community. When studying potential church planting communities, we prayed for areas with (1) a low ratio of established churches to people – the lost; and (2) a greater number of diverse people groups with the potential to impact exponential communities in addition to the target community – the Kingdom. These variables led us to an intersection community in central Edmonton, which bordered downtown Edmonton and a brand-new community with the potential for growth equal to the size of downtown (which due to its age was completely unchurched). Afterward, we completed several demographic studies, looking at individual and family makeup, culture, and career. These were important for us as they have allowed us to tailor ‘the menu’ according to the identity, belonging, and (desired) purpose of the people we are trying to reach. Furthermore, these studies not only allowed us to identify needs and service opportunities but also pre-existing barriers to Christ-centred community.

At Supper Club, we’ve looked for practical ways to communicate engagement. Based on the philosophy that introduced vehicle activated speed indicator devices, our desire is to intentionally collect all points of data and simply tell people how ‘fast’ they are currently travelling in a certain direction at a fixed point in time. It is not intended to police or govern behaviour, but rather encourage reflection and personal assessment, leading individuals to ask, ‘is it my intention to be moving in this direction at this current rate in this season of life?’ Quarterly, we communicate not simply what we intend to accomplish but instead ‘what is the impact of what we have accomplished?’ Simple questions are presented according to our stated mission, vision, and values, asking things such as, whether we have eaten a meal with our neighbours, are exercising life-giving spiritual disciplines, or have served a community need. The questions are intended to be simple, encouraging ‘yes’ or ‘no’ responses. Based

on the responses collected, we encourage a single point of action for the upcoming quarter. Our desire is purposeful integrated missional living rather than seasonal practices where mission can be switched off or assigned to a selected few instead of undertaken by the church (as a whole). We want to have community impact for Jesus through integral disciple making in all seasons.

OFFERING RELATIONSHIP (INSTEAD OF RELIGION)

But he said to him, “A man once gave a great banquet and invited many...” ‘Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.’ And the servant said, ‘Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.’ And the master said to the servant, ‘Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled.’

- ESV, Luke 14:16,21b-23

People are not looking for ‘a church’. This is the reality of the community we are church planting in. Through the studies previously cited and others, the vast majority of people are not interested in going to a building to attend weekly services. In fact, the mere mention of church or ‘religion’ is considered so off-base that it is essentially the simplest way to conclude a conversation. Those are for people unchurched, when engaging many people currently in churches I have found that they are either hesitant to serve or if they are involved, it is out of a greater sense of obligation than worship. However, while many people are disinterested in organized church, COVID-19 has articulated a great hunger for genuine, inclusive, and meaningful relationships. In a 2019 City of Edmonton video, they encouraged people to say ‘hello, how are you?’ after reporting that 1 in 5 Edmontonians feel socially isolated. As a church plant, we’ve prioritized a culture that models itself after Jesus, through the simple invitation to eat with others.

During the last Christmas season, a number of volunteers were cleaning Supper Club and setting up a

Tree. On my way to get pizza for the volunteers, I noticed a trespasser inside one of the vehicles outside. I informed the owner of the vehicle, and he came out to speak with the person. After the trespasser left, I spoke with the owner of the vehicle and they shared that the person was probably in the car because of the cold, and if possible, they’d like to invite them in to warm up. On cue, the trespasser returned because they had forgotten their phone in the car. We then invited them in to not only warm up, but to eat with us. As we shared a meal with them, they also shared their life with us, and we asked if we could pray with them. After praying together, they told us: "I thought I was in trouble when you wanted to talk to me. I didn't know there was a church here, but I am thankful that

this church is here [now]."

Oftentimes, we can become so preoccupied with programs and outcomes, that it is easy to forget that we are called into relationship (first) with God, then with His body, followed by the communities he has sent us to. As we've embarked on this season of church planting, we want to be intentional about developing relationships. Not only have we encouraged intentional simplicity in mission but also in community. It can be tempting in this season of statistical church decline to prioritize the growth of our local church plant, however, one of the great opportunities we see in our community is not only its potential to reach the lost but also for the Church to work together for the Kingdom.

In a 2019 Barna study on evangelism, they reported that among lapsed Christians, 31% would be more interested in learning about Christianity if they "saw various churches in [their] community working together more". It is not only important to ask, 'how we will connect with the community of unbelievers?' but also 'how will we connect with the community of believers'. It is after all, our love for another that "people will know that [we] are [Jesus'] disciples". In this season, how will the Church not only work together but love one another? How do we show love, to churches who have responded to the pandemic differently? How do we work with churches who engage the lost with varying traditions?

At Supper Club, we've attempted to work with other churches by encouraging Christians of different traditions and cultures to come pray together and lead worship in central Edmonton. In October of 2021, when we first moved into our location we hosted a worship night. The goal was not only to facilitate but also invite other churches to lead in this space. Why? We want the Church to take ownership. One of the ways we have been intentional in this area is through worship and vision nights. In October of 2021, we invited several churches to not only attend a worship night but also lead it (in their native tongue). That evening, we worshipped with 59 different people from eight different congregations in two different languages. Encouraged, we did the same thing for Christmas Eve with almost ninety people. This past Good Friday (April 2022), we worshipped with 128 people, from thirteen churches (representing 3 denominations) in English, Mandarin, and Swahili (while being livestreamed via Zoom in mainland China)! At the communion table, Jesus calls all disciples to love and serve one another. In this way, we show and share the gospel to the world around us, and we can do this in all seasons.

CONCLUDING POINTS FOR CHURCH PLANTERS

'Farm to Table' is a food concept that encourages healthy and sustainable eating through local produce

and consumption. As church planters, are we promoting healthy practices which encourage others in our churches to not only serve but also to grow? Jesus encourages His disciples to participate in the harvest (cf. Mk 9:37) and to be reminded that it is God who plants the seeds (cf. Ma 20:1). For Supper Club, we have been learning that it is indeed God who prepares the harvest. During the worship night in October, 2021, a pastor shared with us how nine pastors had previously committed to praying for a church to start in the specific community we planted in. Unbeknownst to us, they started praying on November 26, 2013, almost eight years prior. Even in seasons of great challenge, God is reminding us that "the harvest is plentiful", let's keep praying.

- Pray for planters to move according to God's agenda (not their own).
- Pray for planters to act according to their actual impact (not simply their intentions).
- Pray for planters to prioritize people (not their programs).

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