



THE QUESTION THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

*HOW PLANTING LIFE-GIVING CHURCHES
BECAME OUR DIRECTION*

BY JEFF LEAKE



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The Question That Changed My Life: How Planting Life-Giving Churches Became Our Direction
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It is an honor to be able to help serve Exponential's vision of equipping leaders who are committed to accelerating the multiplication of healthy, reproducing churches. It is so easy to see the hand of Jesus all over what you are doing.

Allison Park Church

Thank you so much for believing in me and in the vision that God has placed upon my heart. It has been such an honor and privilege to serve as your pastor and to partner together with you in pursuing the planting of churches, building the Kingdom, and reaching the 'one.' I also want to express special appreciation to Cullen Allen, my executive pastor, and to the entire staff of APC. Your excellent leadership allowed us to have the kind of healthy DNA that we want to reproduce in others. You also allow me to focus my gifts toward Kingdom expansion, because of the way you are leading within the context of Allison Park Church.

Reach Northeast & CityReach Networks

I get to tell the story about all of the churches planted in the last eighteen years. But the heroes of the story are these amazing, adventure-loving, risk-taking church planters that I have had the honor of working with and helping to sponsor. I am truly amazed at every one of our church planters, but especially am indebted to Brian Bolt for the vision and gifting to birth the CityReach movement. You are truly the most prolific multiplying pastor I have ever met. Church Multiplication Network (CMN) & The Association Of Related Churches (ARC)

Most of these plants would not have succeeded without the training, encouragement and matching fund investment that you have made in our desire to reproduce churches. We love being friends and partners with you in this journey.
AND FINALLY...

Thank you to my incredible wife and partner, Melodie. Nothing I do is possible without you being by my side. I love you with all my heart. Together, we both inherited quite a legacy in our parents, James and Rebecca Leake and David and Bonnie Spencer. They were planting churches, modeling Christlike character and reproducing themselves in other leaders long before we even got our start. They reproduced themselves in us. We are so thankful for it!



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The background of the entire poster is a photograph of a live music performance on a stage. Several musicians are visible, including a guitarist and a singer. The stage is lit with purple and blue lights, and there are bokeh light effects in the foreground. The 'SPARK' logo is overlaid on the upper part of the image, with the tagline 'Igniting a Culture of Multiplication' below it.

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Introduction

'If I Solve Your Problem...'

"I believe that frustration is a major precursor and indicator of vision. If you're not sure what you want your ministry to do and be, perhaps you should start with the question: What frustrates me?" --Robert Morris, The Blessed Life

"Will you put *My* problem first?"

It was the question that changed my life.

The question came to me during a season of prayer, during November of 1996. Looking back now, I can see that God was up to something.

I had been the lead pastor of Allison Park Church (APC), located in the northern suburbs of Pittsburgh for almost five years. Due to a significant lack of space, we were facing some major limitations on our ability to grow numerically. The building we were in had been built back in 1979, and the auditorium where we were meeting had a capacity of about 350 people (400-plus if we used some cramped overflow rooms), and the parking lot could only handle 200 cars. We were meeting in two Sunday morning services, and each was completely maxed out.

I had actually inherited this situation. In 1988, I came to work for Pastor Ron Bailey, who had planted the church in the late 1960s. He had grown the church from its infancy through several building projects and into its current location with about 750 people attending on a weekly basis. In 1991, Pastor Bailey was invited to become the pastor of a church just outside of Sacramento. Within a few months, the APC congregation had asked me to be their new lead pastor.

During the first five years as lead pastor, I was just trying to learn and to survive. But somehow by God's grace, the church had grown under my leadership. I say that because I was only 27 when I became the lead pastor, and was inexperienced in so many aspects of pastoral ministry. During that time, my theme was complete dependence: "God takes the

weak things of the world to shame the strong, and the foolish things to shame the wise (1 Cor. 1:26-30).

FROM FRUSTRATION TO REVELATION

Because we were beyond capacity in our two morning services, I had made it my No. 1 leadership priority to identify a solution. At the time, few churches were having more than two services on a weekend, so adding more services was not an option, within my leadership paradigm. I was convinced that the only way to grow was to obtain more property that would allow us to add parking and build a larger building.

So we prayed. And we searched. We tried to negotiate with our neighbors. Real estate agents were solicited to help us identify a piece of land to purchase. But nothing of any real possibility surfaced.

I was frustrated!

I wanted to lead the church into continual growth, but I couldn't identify a way to make that happen. Even more than that, I felt disappointed and even angry that God somehow seemed disconnected from the entire process. I know He knew about our problem because I told him about it in every prayer. But there was no response from heaven.

One day, I was particularly frustrated over this issue so I set aside some time in the afternoon to pray. I paced back and forth in our auditorium and unloaded my angst to God. Finally, when I had finished venting, I heard a response. It wasn't audible but rather a prompted thought in my spirit that came in that familiar "still small voice" of His presence.

"Okay. I hear you. I know you have a problem!"

The words were both comforting and startling. Then I heard, "Have you considered that I have problems too?"

Honestly, I had never even considered such a thing! *God has problems? What problems? Doesn't He own everything? Isn't He in control of everything?* So I asked Him, "God, what is *Your* problem? What problem are You talking about?"

Now, I think I should say that God doesn't have "issues" or unsolvable challenges that leave Him confused. I think it's best stated that God has "burdens" on His heart He wants us to own and share. God was saying to me, "I share your burden to see your church grow, but do you share Mine?"

I felt Him prompt me with these thoughts: *My burden is your city. You pastor in a city that has so many towns and communities that lack a life-giving church.*

Pittsburgh is really a collection of smaller towns lining the three rivers that mark our region. So many of those smaller communities have been impacted by the loss of the steel Industry. Populations have declined. Churches have moved out. Problems have moved in.

Then God said to me, *If I solve your problem and your church grows into the thousands, that still doesn't solve My problem, because all these towns and communities will still be without a life-giving church.* Then came that life-transforming, church-changing, Kingdom-impacting question.

One

From My Problem to God's Problem

"God is God. Because He is God, He is worthy of my trust and obedience."—Elisabeth Elliot

Immediately following this interaction with God, I was reminded of the promise expressed in Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6:33: "Seek first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you as well." I felt assured that God was illuminating this promise to my life and ministry.

So based on that "Word," I called together my pastoral staff and board and shared what I felt God had spoken to me. We began to research our region and identified communities nearby that appeared to be in need of a life-giving church. We focused on praying for those areas and believed God for the provision to plant churches.

We set a goal to plant one new church a year for five years in five of these target communities:

1. **Crossway Church** In 1996, we planted our first church in a town about 30 minutes north from Allison Park. Our youth pastor, Pat Summers, had been on our staff for six years, and he felt prompted to plant Crossway. So we sent Pat and about 30 people from APC to start this first new church.
2. **Ambridge Christian Center** In 1998 God connected us with a pastor named Denny Ugoletti who had a burden to plant a church in Beaver County. He joined the staff at APC for about six months, and we sent him out with about 25 people to plant in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, about 40 minutes west of APC.
3. **Sharpsburg Family Worship Center** In 1999 my associate pastor felt called to plant in a community about 15 minutes to the south of APC. We were able to send about 75 people with Pastor Russ Horne as this new church launched with over 300 people on their first day! In this plant we experienced our first "resource miracle," as we purchased a fully functional church building for only \$25,000.

4. East End Assembly of God In 2000, we took over a church that had almost completely died with only 10 folks left. So we closed down the church and reopened with Pastor David York as the planter/pastor. David had grown up at APC and was a recent graduate of Bible College. East End AG is located in Bloomfield, Pennsylvania, 30 minutes to the south of APC and within the city limits of Pittsburgh.

5. Ridgewood Assembly of God In 2001 we started this new church on a Saturday night because an old church building became available in West View, Pennsylvania (25 minutes southwest of APC). For about two months, I traveled to the church and spoke, as well as enlisted our staff to lead worship and the children's ministry. Then we found a pastor who became the permanent planter in that new location.

FROM EITHER/OR TO BOTH/AND

As people watched these churches and our multiplication direction take root, I often heard: "You have to choose between multiplying and growing. You can't plant churches and grow your church at the same time."

I shared their concern. Every time we planted, we did lose people. We sent leaders. We released families—tithing families! The first few months after sending out a new group of people to plant a new church, we always saw a dip in attendance at APC. Often, we had to fill holes left by key leaders who had moved on to a church plant. The losses and constant transition were painful. I was often forced to confront my fears that we would never recover from the loss of all the people who chose to leave with these new churches. Honestly, I had to die to myself every time we planted another one.

But I also discovered that God is not an 'either/or' God.

Somehow, during this entire season of aggressive multiplication God moved. Every year, our overall income as a church went up, and the attendance losses were always very short lived. We were growing in number. New leaders were emerging. Churches were being planted, but we weren't left in worse condition. We were stronger and larger than ever.

But that's not all. During this season of planting, seven neighboring property owners suddenly expressed interest in selling their land to us. APC was able to purchase 30-plus acres of adjacent land, putting us in a position to think about expansion and our current

location. In August of 2006, we were able to move into a new ministry center with more parking and a larger auditorium.

God had fulfilled to us what He had promised. As we purposed to “seek first His Kingdom” by planting churches in our city, God began to “add all these things” to us as well. When we adopted God's problem as our priority, God adopted our problems as His priority—and this has been our partnership ever since.

FROM ADDITION TO MULTIPLICATION

So what has happened since? Well, the new space has allowed for new growth. Allison Park Church has grown to more than twice the size we started this journey back in 1996. APC currently holds six services every weekend and has three campus locations. This next year in 2015, our plan is to launch several more services and another new campus location.

And now our thinking has changed. We are no longer only strategizing about “larger” or “bigger”; we are dreaming about “more churches” and a “movement of multipliers.”

After completing the new ministry center at APC's original campus, we went back into planting churches within our region. From 2006 through 2010, we again helped to plant one new church each year. But in 2011, God gave to us a new assignment. Our goal of one new church plant a year had become a practice we had developed a natural propensity and capacity to accomplish.

But I sensed there was something more.

The shift began during a serendipitous phone conversation I had with a fellow pastor about the city of Philadelphia. Remember, I live in Pittsburgh—same state but hundreds of miles away from Pennsylvania's largest city.

“Why doesn't someone do something about Philly?” I asked in frustration. “There are 5 million people who live there, and yet it seems there is so little focus on that city when it comes to church planting. It's just wrong. That has to change!”

As I wondered aloud, I felt the Holy Spirit prompt me: *Why don't you do something about Philadelphia?* I hung up the phone and went into a season of prayer. The burden for that

city grew in me so strong that I actually thought I was supposed to leave APC and go and plant the church myself. But after consulting with some of my mentors, I realized God's assignment to me was to be the parent church pastor of a church planting movement.

During those prayer times, God gave me another "problem" of His to own. He shared with me His burden for the Northeast region of the United States. Sixty million people live in the 25 major cities of this region, which is probably the most dechurched and unchurched population in our nation. Again, I felt God prompt me to put this "problem" first as I pursued His Kingdom.

So we set a goal to plant 100 new churches in the Northeast within 10 years. We began our first new church in Philadelphia, as Brad and Leah Leach started CityLife Church on Sept. 11, 2011 in South Philly. Since that time, God has given us the grace to help in the launches of 38 new churches (as of November 2014).

We have now planted churches in Philadelphia, Boston, Buffalo, New York, Cleveland, Ohio, Brooklyn, New York, Columbus, Ohio, Toledo, Ohio, Pittsburgh, Bangor, Maine Johnstown, West Virginia, Hartford, Connecticut, Binghamton, New York, and more.

What is truly exciting is that these new churches are not all being planted out of Allison Park Church. In fact, the majority of these churches are being planted out of one of the "daughter" churches. CityReach Church Pittsburgh was planted out of APC in 2006, and it has become a prolific multiplying church as well, and is planting many new churches in the poorest and most difficult places in our urban centers.

So Allison Park Church helped to plant CityReach Church Pittsburgh. CityReach Church has planted many churches, and now those churches are planting churches. We can trace four generations from it. APC planted a daughter church, who planted a daughter church, who also planted a daughter church. And each new year this viral momentum is picking up speed as new leaders are multiplied out of these newly planted churches.

FROM PASTOR TO MISSIONARY

Because of this movement of which I am a part of, I now no longer see myself just as the lead pastor of Allison Park Church. Yes, I still serve as the lead pastor, and plan on

continuing in that role for many years to come. But my identity is now no longer just lead pastor of a local church. I now see myself as a missionary to the Northeast.

Actually, the moment we started to dream about planting churches back in 1996, I began to see my perspective shift. I was no longer just concerned for my church and my immediate area. When I began to think about "God's problem" in my city, I started to see my role differently. My thought processes were much more like a missionary sent to reach a region, rather than a pastor growing a local church. Yes, growing a local church is part of reaching a region. My vision has always been growth for my local church. But when I started thinking like a missionary, my vision for growth was not enough. To truly meet the need, I needed to think about multiplying leaders and churches.

MOVING FORWARD

So where do we go from here? How does the Allison Park Church story continue? I think I could summarize that in one word: *obedience!* We never set out to create a church planting movement. Our agenda was not to establish a church planting model or a church growth strategy. Yes, we did those things, but they were always the result of us doing something else.

- First, we sought to *discern* what God was saying to us about our ministry.
- Second, we worked to *study* the problems/burdens He revealed to us.
- Third, we placed a *priority* on pursuing the things that God identified for us as our assignment.

All of which boils down to an attempt to simply *obey* and do what God gave us to do. And we'll continue to do this moving forward. Success for us is defined as obedience to the assignment that God has given. For us, that assignment has involved aggressive multiplication as God's strategy to reaching a region for Christ.

Two

Our Tensions

'tension' - the state of being stretched or strained.

My experience is not as a church planter, but rather as a pastor who resources, coaches and invests in other pastors who are planting a new church. Without a doubt, it is the actual planting of a new church where almost all of the true risk lies. The planter typically steps out into nothing—no money, no leaders, no assurances of success. It is a tremendous adventure I truly admire, and in some ways envy and desire.

But I will say that life as a parent church (or multiplying) pastor doesn't mitigate risk either. It certainly doesn't come without pain or challenge. In most cases, the risk of a multiplying pastor is far less than a planter's. But I know firsthand that many pastors are held hostage by certain tensions and fears—keeping them from stepping out and leading multiplication. Throughout the rest of this chapter, I share seven primary tensions I wrestled with as a leader and we navigated as a church as we followed our multiplication calling and direction.

Tension #1 Faith vs. Fear

Being from Pittsburgh, I am a huge Steelers fan. Our head coach, Mike Tomlin, is famous for responding to questions about why he did or didn't do something. Almost always, you'll hear him say in interviews, "We choose to not live in our fears." As much as I love that sentiment, it's way more difficult to apply than it is to say.

As soon as we decided to step out and plant our first church, I felt the pull of fear on my soul:

- What if everyone leaves our church and goes with the church planter?

- What if our larger givers leave and I'm left with nothing but bills?
- What will happen if my attendance drops?
- What will my peers think of me if I pastor a smaller church than I did before?

I dealt with those fears by setting some guidelines. Pat Summers (our first church planter) and I sat down and had a meeting. I told Pat, "You can recruit anyone you want from APC on two conditions: First, you must tell me who you're recruiting before you talk to them,

and second, you must stay away from two key leaders I'm depending upon right now." Pat was thrilled with this arrangement and kept his word to me.

On the final Sunday before the launch of this new church, Pat spoke in our services about his new calling. When he finished, I put it out there to the church, "Whomever feels called by God to go with Pat and help him plant this church is free to go. In fact, why don't all those who feel called come to the front so that we can pray over you?!"

I guess I really didn't think through what I was doing at the moment, because as soon as the statement left my lips a stream of people left their seats to come to the front. And wouldn't you know it? Who was in the group but one of the two leaders I had told Pat he was not allowed to recruit! God reserved the right to override my restrictions.

As this "restricted" leader made his way to the front, in about five seconds flat my emotions went from shock to fear and then from fear to anger. *God, how could you do this? I didn't ask for much! I am willing to be generous. All I asked for was two guys. Of all people, did you have to speak to him to go with this church plant?* I said all this under my breath as I led this prayer moment.

In a flash, as I protested before God, I felt Him speak to me: *I know you are sacrificing and being generous, but if you're not going to give Me your best, then why are you even doing this?*

From that moment on, I have chosen to die to any effort to control my own church. The only way you can become a multiplying leader is to break with fear. Nothing is birthed out of fear, and everything is birthed in an atmosphere of faith. And what is faith but hearing the 'Word' and believing it so much that you're willing to act upon it.

If you live in your fears, you cannot foster an aggressive multiplying church. In fact, the very decision that we make when we decide to plant churches is a decision to break from fear and live in faith. That decision must be made repeatedly because the pull of fear will always be something we have to purposefully overcome.

Tension #2 Multi-Church vs. Multisite

Some of the questions I get asked go something like this: Why did you decide to plant churches? Why did you not just go multisite?

First, when we began to plant churches, the multisite movement was in its infancy. Honestly, I had never even heard of “multi-campus” when we were planting our first few churches. When I finally learned about multisite, we had already taken major strides toward developing our own model.

Second, we chose to go in the direction of church planting because God blessed and gave favor to our efforts. So we chose, primarily, to stay within the stream of what God appeared to be favoring.

But over the last few years, we have also chosen to go multisite. We have now planted many sovereignly functioning churches, and we continue to do so. And we have also started two multisite campuses. So we are now one church in three locations, and our plans are to multiply in both ways in the future.

Since I now have experience with both, let me provide some comparisons.

- **Branding** – Probably the greatest immediate regret I felt regarding planting churches instead of campuses relates to the opportunity for regional branding that a multisite model provides. We planted nine churches in the Pittsburgh region alone. If all nine of those had been branded as campuses of “Allison Park Church,” we would have been quickly known all over the region. Each of our churches, however, chose their own name and identity, so no one really connected us with one another, unless we did a larger community-wide project and they saw us cooperating.

It is possible for branding to be negative? If you’re going to “brand” something that’s decentralized, make sure each site retains a certain quality. If not, one bad “site” can quickly ruin the reputation of all of them. You can see this in fast-food choices. Wendy’s does a decent job of quality control. Every Wendy’s I’ve ever eaten in feels basically the same, and the food tastes the same. There is a standard of cleanliness. I trust the brand because I have had consistent experiences with it.

Dairy Queen is different. I have been in some DQ's that are clean, high quality and amazing. I have been in others that are dirty, smelly and offered poor service. If you're going to offer a brand, you have to work hard to protect it.

- **Management** – The first issue leads quickly to the importance of the second one. If you plan to pursue multisite ministry, you need to like, and be rather effective at, complex management. Anytime you decentralize something that you're also trying to control, you have to work much harder and smarter at management.

When we plant a new church, we manage (with the church planter) only the launch process and early development phases of the life of the new church. But after the church is strong enough to stand on their own, we release them to manage and govern themselves. When we plant a campus, we manage the launch process and the ongoing life and ministry of that campus over the long haul.

So if you're deciding between planting a church or launching a campus, ask yourself: How much do I like management? Do I have capacity—personally, or on my staff—to handle complex management issues? Do I like to retain quality control, or do I prefer to start and release something?

- **Control** – Probably the greatest difference between campus planting and church planting relates to one word: "control." When we plant a campus, we keep control over everything that campus has and does. When we plant a church, I release control to that new church and everything it has and does.

When there are problems at a campus, they are always our problems. When staff isn't performing well at a campus, they are our challenge to either correct or release. Whatever is going on in the life of a campus is up to us to deal with and provide solutions for the problems. When there are problems at a church plant, they are only our problems at the beginning. But after the new church is up and running, they are no longer my problems—a very freeing realization. I can offer prayer, coaching, support and friendship to the church planter—but at the end of the day, their problems are their problems and not mine. Hallelujah!

So the question here is what has God called you to do. Feeling that God wants you to retain control doesn't make you a control freak. It just means that God has asked you to steward a situation over the long haul. If you sense that God wants you to release control, you're not acting irresponsibly. It just means that God has only asked you to help someone else get a new church started.

- **Reproductive potential** – Disclaimer: What I'm about to say here is just based on my own personal experience. It's possible that I'm wrong.

My sense is this: Church plants have greater reproductive potential than do campuses. In fact, I think one of the reasons God may have shielded me from knowing anything about multisite in the early days was to keep me from limiting the reproductive potential of some of our spiritual sons.

Pastor Brian Bolt planted CityReach Church in downtown Pittsburgh. Brian and I have the same values. We have the same heart. But we have very different styles and approaches to ministry. CityReach Church became a reproducing church, and almost 30 new churches have been planted with the CityReach DNA.

If I had asked Brian to start an Allison Park Church campus, he would've been frustrated trying to be something he wasn't. His unique style and ministry approach would've been stunted in its development. And most likely, the reproductive wave that has come out of that unique church would have never surfaced like it has.

What I love about CityReach is that they are planting churches that are planting churches that are planting churches. Campuses tend to reflect the culture of the original site and tend to simply execute the ministry plan of the original vision. Of course, it isn't impossible for a campus to be unique or to multiply. But it does seem that in most cases, campuses do not develop into reproductive movements.

- **Leadership speed** – One of the pluses of starting campuses instead of churches is the rapid growth potential of a campus. One of the "stoppers" that pastors and church planters have relates to their leadership speed—the capacity to keep an organization moving at the necessary pace to maintain numerical and ministry growth.

Often a church plant will plateau because the leadership speed of the lead pastor does not allow for that church to grow any larger. Many times, campuses are planted out of larger churches that are growing due to their healthy systems and speed of leadership. A new campus has no choice but to adopt the systems and the speed of the church that started it.

For that reason, many campuses grow larger sooner than most church plants. The campus benefits from an internal push of resources, quality, vision casting, volunteers and other healthy systems. Church plants have no such engines present in their environment until the leader develops them and sets them into motion.

- **Cost** – This is another observation I make based on my own personal experience. Again, this may not be true everywhere. My experience is that campuses tend to be more expensive to start and maintain than church plants. In a church plant, typically the parent church commits to raising a specified amount, leaving the planter to raise the rest of the necessary funding through outside sources and matching funds. After the parent church raises their part, they cease to regularly participate financially.

But in the case of a campus, the cost is higher on the front end because we're trying to create the same quality experience from the very beginning. So the investment tends to be much more to ready the facility and technology. Also, many multisite churches start with a larger number of paid staff to support all of the ministries they want to offer from the start.

- **Calling** – The final difference between plants and campuses centers on your assignment from God. I am a huge proponent of this concept that we only do what God assigns us to do. So after you measure all the pros and cons of both planting and campus options, step back to pray and discern what God has called you to do.

For us, we feel called to pursue both options. We are not an anti-campus movement. Neither are we anti-megachurch. Sometimes people hear about our church planting initiatives and make the assumption that this is our one model and that we're against all others. Most often, we carry the label "missional" because we're trying to send out church planters to plant independent churches. The assumption then is that we're not trying to be "attractional."

But we want all of the above.

We want to be missional and attractional. We want to plant new churches. We want to plant campuses. We want to become a megachurch. We want as many of our church plants to grow as large as they possibly can. We want our campuses to grow. And we want all of the above to reproduce and become church planting movements.

Why? Because our primary calling is to reach people who need Jesus.

Tension #3 – Seating vs. Sending

I love Rick Warren's statement: "You can judge the greatness of a church not so much by its seating capacity, but rather by its sending capacity." I so believe this is true.

However, I'll admit that my ego often works against this concept. When I send out a pastor to plant a new church, I can no longer count his growth in the way that I measure the size of my own ministry. If I'm fully transparent in my flesh I like planting campuses more than I like planting churches because I can count the attendance of our campuses on our weekly attendance report. I can also direct all of the giving that comes in through these campuses.

As much as we hate to admit it, the size of your church is a primary metric for measuring ministry and leadership success. I think we all know this isn't God's view. We realize that church size is not a true measure of spiritual leadership success, and we know that the New Testament does not present the leaders of mega ministries as the superstars of Christianity. And yet, nothing messes us up quite like a dip in our weekly attendance.

Please understand that I'm not pointing the finger at anyone. Rather, I'm confessing my own personal struggle with the tendency to measure success by church size. In fact, I was dealing with this very frustration when God prompted me to pursue the vision of planting 100 new churches in 10 years.

In May of 2010, and I was frustrated with the lack of growth in our weekend attendance at Allison Park Church. We seemed to be stuck at a certain size. Nothing we were trying was working. And again, I was voicing my frustration to heaven about this problem. After

venting, I sensed God say to me, *When did I ever ask you to concern yourself with how big your own church is?*

It was a pretty strong rebuke!

So I asked, "Then what I am to be concerned about?" I felt the Holy Spirit remind me, *Do you really have to ask Me that? Don't we have this established by now?* I reflected, *You mean planting churches?* The answer was obvious. At that moment, God confided in me His burden for the Northeast.

Since that time, Allison Park Church has been involved in helping to plant almost 40 new churches throughout the Northeast. Thousands of people attend these new church plants every week, and people are being saved, baptized, disciplined and called into ministry. Many are finding freedom from drugs, alcoholism and other life-controlling issues. But none of these weekend attendees show up on Allison Park Church's weekend attendance numbers.

Since 2010, we have grown by a few hundred people in our weekend attendance. But we have grown by a few thousand through our church plants. I don't control any of it and can't really take credit for any of it. God chose to use me to help others get their churches started. But at the end of the day, the planters and their teams make the ministry happen.

My new motto for ministry goes like this: Life is not measured so much by what I do, but rather by what I set into motion.

One day when I stand before God, He will not measure my ministry by how many people attended our church on any given weekend. He will consider whether or not I was obedient to what He asked me to do. He will measure the ripple effect that my obedience had on the expansion and extension of the Kingdom of God.

Tension #4 – Organic vs. Organized Relationships

As I write this eBook, Allison Park Church has been part of planting 50 new churches since 1996. About half of those were daughter churches planted directly out of us. The other half is comprised of churches that have been planted by one of our daughters (or in some cases, our partner) churches.

That's a lot of churches to have as a part of a larger family of churches! Every year, we hold an annual conference called IGNITE. Most of our church plant pastors and staff come in for that gathering. It's so gratifying to hear the stories of life change, see the growth of these leaders and their churches, and feel the connection of belonging to the same movement.

So what is the glue that holds our network together?

We have chosen to be a completely "organic" group. There are no dues or paybacks. There are no commitment forms to sign or expectations that a church has to meet to belong. We have chosen to be loosely organized as a relational network.

In most cases, the pastors who connect with our network do so because I'm serving as their pastor. My goal is to continue to provide a level of pastoral covering to our church planters and their families long after their church has been planted. This choice to be a pastor to other pastors also has allowed for churches not planted by us to connect with our network and our various events and initiatives.

Our hope is that the church plants will want to remain connected to one another. We desire for each of them to become part of the vision for multiplication. With all of the initiatives we have going, we depend on the fact that the churches we helped to plant will want to "pay it forward" and will voluntarily give financially to help our network function.

But in all honesty, this is often not the case. Many of the churches we have planted don't give back to help our network office and do not invest financially or in any other way in our planting of new churches. I believe they intend to do it, but with the stresses of paying the bills and with the opportunities before them to connect to other missions' endeavors, they often forget to prioritize us in their plan.

I can see why some church planting networks require their church planters to sign a commitment form where they must agree to give back a certain percentage to the network after their church has been planted.

Here's why we have chosen to remain organic. First, most churches planted today have received matching funds from at least one or more church planting organizations. Almost all of those organizations require a long-term commitment to give a percentage of their

income to church planting. We don't want to add one more commitment to a young church's budget. Second, I don't want my role as pastor in these planters' lives to be dependent on a financial commitment. I will be their pastor whether or not they invest back into our network.

I'm not sure if this is or isn't the right approach. I debate myself on this issue all of the time, especially when finances are tight. But somehow, God has always provided what we needed at the time when we need it. So for now, we'll move forward with this organic approach.

Tension #5 – All Should Plant vs. Apostles Should Plant

The final tension we've faced is controversial, centering on expectations and gifts. I've heard it said, "Healthy things always reproduce. So if you're a healthy church, you should be planting other churches." This is one view: Every church should plant another church, and every pastor should be a multiplying pastor.

There is an alternative view. Ephesians 4:11-12 tells us that God has released five ministry gifts into the church to equip the church to do the work of the ministry. The gift of the "apostle" seems to relate to multiplication. The Greek word, *apostolos* (from where we get the word apostle) means "to send or to be sent." From a very practical perspective, it seems that some are gifted as "senders." They have capacity to raise up and release the other four ministry gifts into what God has called them to do and be.

My experience is that a person with an apostolic gift cannot help but multiply. Some church planters in our network have not only planted one church, but also have gone on to plant several churches or campuses out of their church. It was clear, early on, that these planters had the ability and capacity for multiplying leaders and churches.

Other church planters in our network are tremendous pastors. They are growing a strong church, winning people to Jesus and making disciples. They have talked about one day planting a new church, but it doesn't seem as if they have the capacity for it. They agree with the concept of church planting and want to invest in it, but it's not something that seems to materialize within their context.

My bias is to believe that only leaders who are gifted with apostolic function will become aggressive multipliers. And then I meet people like Barnabas Motakambali from Tanzania. Barnabas leads a movement of churches that is attempting to plant 10,000 churches in the next 10 years. He believes every pastor leading a church should be planting new churches. And his churches seem to do it. They are asking for every church to plant a new church at least once every three years. That kind of radical multiplication is incredible to watch!

Here's how I deal with the tension. I teach this: Every pastor should follow the leading of the Holy Spirit and not just assume we're supposed to plant a new church. We should seek God for His direction for what He wants to do in our church and in our city. Remember that church planting is only a means to an end; it is not an end in itself. The end goal is to reach people who need Jesus. Church planting is God's primary way of accomplishing His mission, but it's not the only way to do that.

I believe that all churches and all pastors should be leading people to Jesus and that all should be seeking to build the Kingdom first. I believe that all should be giving toward and partnering with new churches to get them started. But for me, it's not crystal clear if every pastor and every church should parent a new church.

Three

Our Learnings

"Generally speaking, there are two kinds of learning: experience, which is gained from your own mistakes; and wisdom, which is learned from the mistakes of others." --John Maxwell

I could write many pages about what we have learned over the last 18 years of planting new churches. Much of the lessons learned have come from mistakes made. Some lessons or insights have come through watching others succeed.

Lesson #1 – When sending a staff member to plant a new church, hire their replacement before sending them out.

I learned this lesson the hard way. With the first church we planted, I sent one of our pastoral staff members to be the planter. What I didn't account for was just how much this would impact my life. What I ended up with was three extra jobs.

First, I was still lead pastor of Allison Park Church. Second, I had to assume the duties of the staff member that I was sending (and/or at least reassign them). Third, I had to spend the time trying to hire someone to take his place. Finally, I became a coach to this staff member as he was in the process of this new plant.

After doing this several times, I realized my error and more importantly how to correct it. If you know you're sending a staff member out to plant a new church, you can delay the plant for a few months while you seek to find someone to take his or her place on your team. You also gain valuable time that can be spent having planters train their replacement.

Lesson #2 – It's always best to define expectations upfront. You avoid so much pain later.

Relationships are hard work. Even in the best situations, misunderstandings can arise, feelings can be hurt, and partnerships damaged. Parent churches often feel they have been more than generous with the churches they're planting. Church plants often feel that the parent church could have done more.

To avoid all these hard feelings, we now start the journey by putting together a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that communicates expectations and outlines exactly what the church planter is expected to do, and exactly what the parent church is committed to do. Both parties sign this document at the beginning of the partnership, which helps to avoid future misunderstandings.

Realize, however, that an MOU does not replace the need for other types of relational effort. Each needs to extend prayer, encouragement, friendship, and grace to the other. But putting your expectations in writing does help eliminate unnecessary grief.

Lesson #3 – Everyone needs a dad (spiritual father).

I guess this is what I enjoy most about being a parent church pastor. I get an opportunity to form a very unique and powerful relationship with the church-planting pastor. My goal is to be more than a coach and a donor. I want to provide a spiritual covering for planters and their families. I see this as so much more than just investing in a new church; I see this as investing in the life of a spiritual son.

Approaching the relationship this way sets the tone for every conversation. The planter is not just an employee or a missionary that we're supporting. I'm choosing to encourage, develop, and shape them. When we talk, we discuss strategy. But just as often, I'm trying to speak life into their soul. I want them to feel my prayers and know that in every way I have their back.

This relationship tone also allows for the network to develop organically. Because there is a relational investment, I'm able to provide a natural covering for the church planter even after the church has been planted. We also seek to extend that relational covering not just to the church planter and their family, but also to the new church. I want the pastoral staff and leadership team of the new church to know they have a pastor who is supporting them and is there for them if crisis occurs.

Lesson #4 – Territorialism is best overcome by demonstrating humility, respect and a servant spirit.

Though we rarely run into a neighboring pastor who opposes one of our new church plants, from time to time it has happened. Whenever we plant new churches, we most often plant in the Northeast and in urban centers, where there isn't already an abundance of life-giving churches.

When we do run into a pastor who feels we're encroaching on their territory, we do our best to serve them rather than simply demand that they get over it and agree with our decision to plant. How?

- When we come into a new area, we meet with neighboring pastors and explain whom we are and whom we're trying to reach. Often, our target audience is different from theirs, and that resolves the potential conflict.
- We promise not to recruit any of their members. In fact, we will go out of our way (if a pastor is concerned) to remove their members' names and addresses from any of the mailings we plan to do within the community.
- We offer to share outreaches with them. When we're doing something in the community, we invite them to join us and get equal billing so that everyone in the community knows both churches are making this outreach happen. I always find it interesting that very few churches choose to join our outreaches.

In most cases, neighboring pastors become content with our presence. When we've taken this three-pronged approach, we have never experienced any long-term opposition from a neighboring church.

Lesson #5 – The greatest need is never money. It's always leaders.

Maybe you've heard it said, "If you have God's vision, then you'll have God's provision." This has been our experience. Somehow, money has never been the limitation when it comes to rapid and aggressive multiplication. We have had buildings donated to us. We have seen finances come in from unexpected sources. God has given us favor in gaining buildings to lease for very cheap rates.

What is our primary limitation?

It's what Jesus pointed out to His disciples: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Pray to the Lord of the harvest to send for laborers" (Matt. 9:37). It's the only shortage in the Kingdom! Finding willing, talented and anointed church planters and church planting staff is the only thing that holds us back from planting even more churches than we're planting now.

Lesson #6 – Leaders don't show up ready-made. They must be developed.

I absolutely love Bill Hybels' teaching on the 5 C's that Willow Creek Community Church uses when hiring new staff:

1. Character: They must have integrity and be trustworthy;
2. Chemistry: They need to fit with the rest of the team;
3. Competency: They need to be capable in their area of assignment;
4. Calling: They need a sense that God has assigned them to us;
5. Culture: They need to carry the same DNA as the rest of the organization.

When I read this list, I completely agree that this is the criteria for a long-term and effectively functioning leader on any team. The problem comes when we search for a person who meets all five C's, and we come up empty. What do you do when you can't find a 5-C leader to hire or plant a new church?

You have to build 5-C leaders from scratch! In fact, the church at large needs an entire approach to leadership development that focuses on building future leaders from the ground up. Over the last few years, I have watched one of my spiritual sons build what is much like a leadership "farm system" to borrow a term from Major League Baseball.

I talked about Brian Bolt earlier. He leads the CityReach Network and is planting churches faster than any human I have ever seen plant. Just this past September, CityReach Network planted 13 new churches on one weekend. Many of these church planters, who are planting in inner-city areas, were addicted to drugs five or six years ago. Now they're planting churches!

Brian takes former drug addicts and turns them into church planters. How? First, he believes in them. From the moment they enter a CityReach Church, these leaders are speaking life

and faith over people. They preach that God not only saves and sets free, but also that He gives us purpose and that no matter where we've been in life, God can use us for His purposes. Then through a system of opportunities (leading worship, preaching and testing out their skills), they provide development and a chance to get some honest and direct feedback. Brian describes these tiered opportunities much like the development leagues in baseball (A, AA, AAA, and the Majors):

A – Small group devotionals or worship times

AA – Friday night outreach services

AAA – Being on the platform to pray or lead a part of a church service

Majors – Preaching or leading worship during a weekend service

Every time someone steps out to lead, he or she gets a dose of "grace and truth." Their supervisor will affirm them like crazy. They will speak life and faith over them. Then they will identify one area where the planter needs to improve and they'll provide honest and direct feedback to help planters grow in their skills.

Learning #7 – The best kind of promotion is not marketing; it's life transformation.

I have never personally planted a church. My role as lead pastor is to help others plant. But I have observed what makes new churches rapidly grow. My first experience dates back to watching my own father plant a church back in the 1960s and '70s. I was just a small boy, but I have talked extensively with my dad about some of the keys to his effective plant. The church my father planted grew from seven people at their first meeting to over 1,000.

One of the key moments happened early when they were averaging about 30 people. One Sunday, a man named Paul entered the service. He was not a believer. In fact, he was a hardened man with a lot of anger in his life. He had recently broken his foot in a terrible car accident, and someone in his family persuaded him to come to church.

At the end of the service, my dad offered to pray for Paul. When they prayed, God supernaturally healed Paul's foot. It was obvious to Paul that God had answered his prayer and that he had experienced a miracle. That day, Paul gave his life to Christ.

The change in him was so dramatic that everyone who knew Paul started coming to church: his immediate family, his cousins, his second cousins, their friends, etc. Overnight, the church more than doubled in size. It was a key miracle in the life of a key individual.

Isn't this what we see happening in Jesus' ministry? Jesus would enter a city and perform a key miracle in the life of a key individual, and the transformation of that person's life would be the billboard for the ministry that Jesus provided. We see the same thing happen with the apostles throughout the Book of Acts. When someone's life is truly changed by the gospel, the word of that transformation will spread and people will want to come and see to discover how they can experience that same kind of grace.

I believe that this is way the CityReach churches have made such an impact. When a CityReach church is planted, they often establish a Hope (Recovery) Home for those who are dealing with addictions and life-controlling issues. Addicts can come and stay for free and be helped and disciplined to live a new life.

When one of these addicts is truly changed by the gospel and by the loving atmosphere of a life-giving church, they become the best advertisement for what God is doing in these newly planted churches.

Learning #8 – It's possible to overvalue strategy and to undervalue prayer.

What an advantage it is to be a church planter in this era! So much is available to church planters that wasn't available even 20 years ago: books, training, matching funds, coaching, demographic studies, marketing materials, portable equipment and experts, etc.

In many ways, church planting has become a science filled with tools and formulas. Because so many things are available to us we can sometimes forget the greatest resources we have for planting: the power of prayer. Church planting is, at its core, a miraculous activity. It requires the work of the Holy Spirit. We can prepare. We can preach. We can plan. But only God can bring the increase.

We know this is true, but often we don't really integrate this truth into our approach until we hit the wall of some impossibility in our church-planting journey—when we run out of money, or the lease on the building falls through, or a major part of our team walks away.

Suddenly, we find ourselves recognizing that “if God doesn’t come through in a major way, this is not going to work!”

Yes. And that has always been the case.

So we should start the journey with that recognition. We should set aside major seasons of fasting and prayer, recruit as many serious prayer partners as we can to back us in our approach, and constantly return to the reality that everything we do is dependent upon God.

Learning #9 – If we love “the one,” God will trust us with more.

One of the trends in today’s church planting world is to identify a target audience that feels cool and culturally connected. So many church planters are targeting the young adult, artistic, trend-setting, highly educated, progressive individual. And there is a huge and obvious need among that demographic because so many who fit that description are unchurched or de-churched.

But sometimes I feel that we may be overlooking some other very needed people groups. In our context, we use the term “the one” to describe someone who is hurting, forgotten, overlooked and disconnected from God. We draw this concept from Luke 14. While Jesus was attending a banquet hosted by a wealthy friend, He said to His host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed” (Luke 14:13).

I think we could take Jesus’ words here and apply them to church planting: “When you plant a church, don’t just invite the trendy, appealing, qualified, educated, artistic, or good looking. Invite the poor, the addict, the sick, the immigrant, the old, and the mentally challenged. If you do this, you’ll be blessed.”

My experience has been that when we spend our energies going after ‘the one,’ no one else is searching for—but that Jesus deeply loves—God will give us more people than we know what to do with. In fact, if you lack traction and can’t seem to get people to join your

church or connect with your launch team, expand your vision and commit to going after the one.

Learning #10 – Don't forget. We're making history!

About a year ago, I was in a coaching conversation with a pastor who was just a few months away from his launch date. He was struggling through some challenges in building his launch team and in raising the needed funding. God had just done a mini miracle of provision in his life, and he was recounting how encouraged he was by this small and yet very needed answer to prayer.

"You need to write all these things down in a journal somewhere," I told him. "Keep a record of all the ways that God has been sovereignly involved with the launching of this new church. Think about it. One day, 50 years from now (should the Lord tarry), your new church will hold its 50-year anniversary celebration. When they do, they will talk about these early days. They will recount the miracles God did in making this vision a reality."

Your efforts in planting a new church are not just starting a new institution; they are launching a new message to the world. Everything God does through you will reveal who He is to the next generation. You're not just planting a church; you are creating a message from your life.

And that is my prayer for you, church planter and leader—that God would do amazing things through your life and ministry as you listen for and respond to the life-changing questions He's asking. I pray that He would reveal Himself through you and whatever you do to a world that needs to know Him.

About the Author



Jeff Leake is a graduate of Central Bible College with a Bachelor's of Arts in Bible, and he graduated from the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary with a Masters of Arts in missiology. These themes—biblical and missional—are evident in his writing and his leadership as the lead pastor of Allison Park Church, located in the north hills of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

During Jeff's 21 years as lead pastor, many organizations have been founded. Reach Northeast is a church planting network designed to facilitate new churches throughout the northeast United States. The Network of Hope is a non-profit organization designed to work through local churches to bring lasting change through very practical forms of community ministry. The Northeast Ministry School was established to train church planters, missionaries and members of church planting teams. Jeff currently serves as the president of Reach Northeast and the Northeast Ministry School, and he is the vice president of the Network of Hope.

Jeff and his wife Melodie have five children. Melodie serves on staff at Allison Park Church as the pastor over women's ministry. Jeff and Melodie have spoken worldwide at leadership conferences in Sweden, Nicaragua, Tanzania, Rwanda, and India and at many regional leadership events throughout the United States.