



Fixing A Plane While Flying: Planting A Church In A Pandemic

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TRANSCRIPT

Stuart Kellogg:

Welcome. Today we'll be talking with a man who is literally building the post COVID church, Jeff Wolheter is a church planter in northeast Indiana, Jeff planted his first church in 2008. In Kendallville, Indiana. After a decade he and wife Andrea felt the Lord leading them to plant again, but in a much different way. It seems to me a first century way. That meant looking at the American culture, looking at the call of the church to make disciples and deciding the old model of build the church they will come is broken, probably forever. We'll talk about the discipleship principles Jeff is following and how they can help your church welcome Jeff to the post COVID church podcast.

Jeff Wolheter

Thank you, Stuart, it's good to be with you today.

Stuart

Well, you didn't just jump from one church to another, you took a lot of time looking at the culture, looking at how America has changed. Can you talk about the three macro cultures?

Jeff

Yeah, yeah. So yeah, when I planted, my first church was there for 10 years. And when I felt the Lord, calling us to plant again, I didn't like you said, I didn't want to just plant another church just to have another church, but one that would make disciples in this culture. And so I really started studying the culture we're living in. And to really understand the culture today, you got to look in the past. And one of the things I discovered, was, there's been, especially with religion,

three macro cultures that we see in the world, one being that pagan culture. So you know, which was much much of the world besides Judaism, before the time of Jesus, even the time of Jesus, which is a worship of many gods, the worship of idols, and there's, you know, all kinds of, you know, the sacrifices, and there was taboos and things you're supposed to do and not supposed to do, and a lot of irrational ways that things worked. And you just hope you could manipulate the gods for them to be in your favor. And so that was much of the history of this world is pagan, a pagan culture. And then comes the the church and, of course, the early churches in the midst of that pagan culture. And eventually, Emperor Constantine converts, or maybe converts, at least publicly says he's become a Christian makes Christianity legal. And we see money pouring into the church, to church and state, joining, in many ways. And eventually, in the Western world, and Europe, we see a Christian culture, come to be in a Christian culture.

Most people believe that there is one God, that He had a son named Jesus who came to earth and died for our sins. They believe that there's a Bible that that the, the Word of God is found in. And so even if you're not a born again, Christian, most people in a Christian culture hold the tenets of Christianity. And, and again, they may not be a born again, Christian, but they believe there's one God and a lot of the ethics of Christianity and going to church is good, and all those types of things. And we see that in Europe, in the United States was founded in that Christian culture. But what we are seeing now is a third macro culture, which many would call the post Christian culture. And the post Christian culture is a culture in a sense, almost against Christianity, that where the pagan culture studied or worshipped many gods of the Christian culture, one God, the post Christian culture is no gods or I, myself, am God, the truth is found in me, and it may be different for you. But that's okay. Truth is what it is for me. And, and there's a rejection of authority of institutions. True truth varies as a lot of flux in the post Christian culture, because truth kind of varies with the majority. And if the majority changes, that's where things go. And so it helps us to understand that each one of these these cultures is reached differently. As Christians, we have to reach each one of them differently. And I would say the post Christian culture, more closely connected with reaching people in a post Christian culture as in the pagan culture, so much different from a Christian culture.

Stuart:

Well, Mark Sayers says in his book, *The Disappearing church*, the way he put it, is that there's there's no scaffolding left. You really have to start almost at Ground Zero among those Those who have not had any real grasp of what Christianity is, is that what you find?

Jeff:

Yeah, that's so true. Um, you know, and there's, you know, almost some positives in that too, in a Christian culture, there's a lot of people who think they're a Christian, because they may go to church or they were born in a Christian family, or, or, you know, that's just what we are in America, we're Christians. But they may not even know the Lord on a personal basis and have true faith in him. And so, in a post Christian culture, you don't have to convince people, they're not a Christian, they already know that. And, and so seeing someone who's living that life, if they're truly living, it should be attractive to people. And they, as they come into relationship with you, and you're truly living the Christian life.

Stuart:

Well, you've been out of seminary, but 15 years, mostly biblical seminary, and your goal was to be a church planter. So what you're saying compared to 15 years ago, a whole lot different, right?

Jeff:

Yeah, it's definitely changed over time. You know, when I when I planted the first time, but back in 2006, we actually started the process then launched in 2008, you know, it was a lot was about inviting people to church, getting the word out marketing, you know, having a really well I call it attractional model, having a good speaker, as a pastor who can communicate the word well, having a good worship team, a good children's program, and attract people in because in a Christian culture, you know, people are like, Oh, you know, I have kids, now, I should probably go to church, or it's good for my standing to go to church. And so you could, you could kind of do that. But that's becoming less effective. As we continue to move into more post Christian culture.

Stuart:

I'm speaking with Indiana church planter, Jeff Hall heater. And you and Andrea, and you have four children, three teenagers and a 10 year old, what a time to start a church. And I liken it to building an airplane, while it's flying, you're planting a church during a pandemic. So talk about and your focus is going to be as I understand it, the younger 40, the 40 year olds and younger, they're not going to respond to the old way or they

Jeff:

I know, you know, no matter how you're you're raising your kids. Today, they're living in a post Christian culture, and with the influence of internet and social media and all that stuff. You know, there's so many influences on the younger

people. And studies show that the millennials and the Gen Z years 70% of them won't attend church, even if invited. And and I'll tell you from experience, even, you know, 10 years ago, when I would invite people to church people, I was acquainted with whatever 80% of them that would say, Yes, I'll come to church never came. So I mean, that trend was already happening. But it's even more so today, especially with the younger generation. And so we cannot reach them. Do just having a church service or having a Christian event at our church and say, Hey, come to our church, and then try to get them there and then share the gospel with them. We've got to reach them in ways outside of the traditional church worship or a church event type of thing. So that's what we're trying to do.

Unknown Speaker 8:39

How do you see the model working, which is so different than the traditional as far as how you see your church plant starting.

Unknown Speaker 8:47

A lot of it, you know, when we studied church culture, but I also studied deeper the principles, discipleship principles of Jesus. And you see, in Luke nine, he sends out the disciples to by to Luke 10, he sends out the 70 to two by two, and he says, don't take anything with you don't take food, money, extra clothing, basically, go find a person of peace. And if your peace stays within, stay with that person, don't move house to house, and really disciple that person, and they'll take care of you. they'll provide food, clothing, and all this stuff. And what we've done in the church is often we got to provide all the resources, we got to provide food, entertainment, and attract people to us. Jesus says, you go to them, let them provide for you and you stay with one person, a person of peace with is really a person has a sphere of influence around them. And if you reach that person, get to know them. They're going to reach the people. They have influence over. And what we've done in the past is we take people, they come to Christ and then we take them out of their circle of influence. You got to be around the church people and shun these people in it. We wouldn't quite say it like that, but Then they're excited to evangelize and share what's happened in their life, but they're no longer around. They're non Christian friends. And so we are learning how to have spiritual conversations, which really is just asking questions.

Unknown Speaker 10:14

Jesus was the master at asking questions. When someone would ask him a question. He would respond with a question. And one of the reasons I believe he did that is because when you answer a question you in conversations, but when someone says, you say, when I was a pastor, and someone said, hey, what time was your worship service? If I say 1030, that ends the conversation. But if I say,

Hey, why are you asking? And they'll say, Oh, you know, I think our kids should be in church. Why do you think your kids could be in church, you just keep asking questions. And you get to know people, you get to hear the heart of where they're at. And so what we're doing is trying to find disciple people, as we get to know them, and learn how to ask questions, and just engage with people finding those people who really lean in, when you get to know them and talk about Jesus, because my story is integrated with Jesus. And so those people who really lean in are like, Oh, you know, when they their their marriage is struggling, and I say, Well, my marriage struggled once, let me tell you what, what helped us and it has to do with Jesus and those who lean in, you know, we're like, okay, those are people who are seeking, and they may not go to a church service, but they're in a relationship with you, and you can continue to share with them. And so that's how we're starting to building what we're calling discipleship communities.

Unknown Speaker 11:35

So what will they look like? And you're in the process of building that now? Meeting in different homes? How do you see envision, let's say this the next year? How do you see that laying out?

Unknown Speaker 11:45

Yeah, you know, it's a, it's a very slow process to start with. And in your traditional church planning, you get a good worship service. And you know, in your lawn Sunday, you're hoping for a lot of people and then just kind of going from there, where this is more, let's get a foundation, or a culture of discipleship and discipleship, multiplication, and then maybe we'll have the bigger worship service. And so it starts out a lot smaller. And so right now we have one, what we call an accelerate gathering, where there's, there's seven of us, it's just guys in this first one. And where we talk about spiritual conversations, every every two, we meet once every two weeks, and we try to meet in a way that doesn't get in the way of family time. So we meet at eight from eight to 10 o'clock every other Monday. And just growing and how do we have discipleship are the spiritual conversations. And then as, as they're learning to do that, and then they start to reach other people. And then we start more groups. And so, you know, in the next year, I don't know, I'm looking to start a second one here in about a month, we'll see how many. And we want this to be Spirit led. It's not like, Hey, we're gonna have this many groups by here by there. Let's see how the Spirit works. Let's keep doing what God has called us. Keep moving forward, but don't really know how many. And so teaching people how to how to make disciples. And so I think I've shared this with you once. But you know, when I find someone who is is spiritually leaning in, and they have questions, and I have a seminary degree, we actually graduated together from seminary. And I have a lot of knowledge in here and I can just tell them the answers, what I gotta do is

constantly point them to the Bible, you're struggling with with lust, okay, let's see what the Bible has to say. And that's, you're constantly pointing them to the Bible, the answers are not not with me, the answers are here. And what you're actually doing is teaching them how to make disciples. So once they start growing, and people come to faith through them, I can't disciple very many people, you know, Jesus can only disciple 12, really, I'm probably not going to be nearly as effective as him. So there's only a handful of people. So when someone new comes to Christ, the new believers are going to start disciple in them. And that's what I culture of discipleship and discipleship, multiplication comes in.

Unknown Speaker 14:16

So you see your church starting after these leaders in a bit than in their own homes, reaching out and in each making a smaller group so that there'll be a couple of home churches, if you will.

Unknown Speaker 14:30

Exactly. It could be in homes, it could be in coffee shops, even, you know, we meet at a local church, just in one of their you know, Sunday school rooms, wherever a third space, but yeah, in in teaching people how to make disciples and then they're gonna reach people where they work where they socialize, through school, I mean, teenagers are some of the best that's the people I'm working with. When you get a couple teens. users who are on fire, man, they can just I can it's really spread through through their school. Because teenagers are, I don't know, they did something about them. They're, they're more outgoing, more willing to share things. And so yeah, can be in school people you work with, socialize with, you know, wherever.

Unknown Speaker 15:18

And so will you have a name so the people who are in their their homes will be part of a church. Have you chosen the name yet?

Unknown Speaker 15:26

No, we haven't done that. And partner, he says, We are called to make disciples. And we feel like we're missionaries to the people that the church, the American church hasn't reached very well. Eventually, yet, we'll have a name. But you know, if the people were discipling, or attending different churches, that's okay. We're okay. That's

Unknown Speaker 15:48

heresy what you just said, you won't say a lot of pastors saying that?

Unknown Speaker 15:52

Well, you know, I have two, two pastors who are in my, my accelerate gathering right now. And they get it, it's about the kingdom. And, you know, so everybody in the group right now is, is already a Christian. And really what we're doing is detoxing them from the American church, that it's about, you know, the size of your building, or your budgets or a large congregation. But it's about the things Jesus talked about, you know, which is, you know, making disciples living a holy life, you know, serving the poor and the least of these, a lot of things, we talk about a church, but we make the priority, people Sunday morning worship, you know, that kind of stuff. And, and really, you know, when I was a pastor, I probably spent 70% of my time towards Sunday morning, from, you know, what are teaching Sunday school, preaching order service, all that stuff, where I could have been discipling people that are focusing on an hour or two a week.

Unknown Speaker 16:55

So when you have these, let's say, several smaller house churches in a year or so then you mentioned that, that you would gather once a month together to celebrate or have a supper or something of that sort.

Unknown Speaker 17:09

Yeah, you know, that's, that's kind of the idea. Again, we're just kind of letting the spirit lead. But that's kind of the vision I have is, and I've seen this in different cities, we're actually planting in a rural area. So it's been really interesting doing it here. But like, in a bigger city, I know that they'll have these house churches that house churches, and like the fourth Sunday of the month, they'll rent a space and all gathered together, but the rest of the month, you know, meeting in smaller houses or you know, coffee shops, and a lot of times I'll include a meal, and that, you know, there's something about having a meal together. You know, and Jesus often, you know, you know, some of the key times that his his ministry was eating with people and, you know, the tax collectors and the sinners and even his disciples, you know, and so yeah, doing life together. It doesn't mean we have to live together or anything like that. But it's more than just once a week. It's it's gathering together, getting an intimate relationship and being there for each other throughout the week.

Unknown Speaker 18:14

I'm speaking with Indiana church planter, Jeff wall heater. And finally, if you'll talk about just a little what you learn from your last church plant, because you you started, again, a bit split out and then came together and ended up with a building and that changed things didn't.

Unknown Speaker 18:32

Yeah, you know, it's interesting. When we planted the first time, of course, I didn't really know what I was doing. I was fresh out of seminary, and we didn't

do things in one sense, the traditional way, we didn't even have a worship team, when we started, we had a space that that didn't have air conditioning, which down where you live, that would be disastrous. here in Indiana, you know, three months of the year was pretty rough. You know, I'd be dripping with sweat when I was preaching. It was not an aesthetically pleasing place. And so, and we did a lot of outward focus things, free oil changes for single moms that going into the the worst apartment complex in town, all those kinds of things. And we attracted a lot of unchurched people, which was our goal. But five years in, we got a building and it was right on the US Highway. It was really the church building. It was only 20 some years old. So it was really for finding a church building, you know, pretty new, and we tripled in size over the next two years. But what we grew up with was with church people, you know, the church that was doing things in town, a lot of stuff that we were doing was now a real church because we had a building and a permanent space and we are very visible on the US Highway now. And we grew very quickly. And in fact, after those two years, I didn't take a sabbatical because I was just emotionally drained with all the growth and not delegating well, but one of the things I recognized was we were just attracting church people. And we wanted to reach unchurched people and we wanted to make disciples, and there was really a holy discontent within me and my wife of how do we have a church that reaches unchurched people? And so, yeah, when that building, if I had to do it all over again, I wouldn't have a building. And I hope never to if God calls us to do it, we'll do it. But I think that building was was a big factor in causing us to have mission drift for what our original mission was.

Unknown Speaker 20:34

And the church is called to make disciples. Number one. So yeah, and that's fascinating that you mentioned the Sunday because a couple of recent posts, couple of recent folks have talked to him and said, we've got to get out of the Sunday only model. And I guess the pandemic has sort of forced that having that. So maybe that's the upside.

Unknown Speaker 20:53

Yeah, yeah. I saw a quote recently by Rick Warren, how if your church only does worship, you know, then you're, you're when the pandemic hit, you are trying to get back to that meeting as quickly as possible. But churches worship is important, the communal worship, but it's so much more than that. And it has to do with making disciples. And, you know, you had a post recently about, you know, if persecution comes, well, if the model that I'm talking about, if persecution comes, I have no idea if it will or won't, but if it does, we'll be ready for it. Where the bigger church, you know, they might struggle with that. And I think that the pandemic has shown the church, some of its weaker areas, and

hopefully the church will take, see that and make necessary changes. And I believe, you know, certainly some are,

Unknown Speaker 21:42

well, All the best to you. And I should have mentioned to your by vocational, I mean, that's part of the model, too. It's not the traditional getting a paycheck every every week from the church, right?

Unknown Speaker 21:52

Yeah, it really wouldn't be what we call co vocation where our vocation is not just helping us make money, but it's part of our ministry putting us around people that we can have those spiritual conversations and really serving our community as well. But yeah, never never planned to be full time as a pastor again.

Unknown Speaker 22:11

And Aren't we all called to be co vocational? We forgot to forget that. Even those of us who aren't on staff right to be co vocational.

Unknown Speaker 22:20

Yep, exactly.

Unknown Speaker 22:22

My guest today, the post COVID church podcast, Jeff Hall, heater, church planner from Indiana, who's stepping out in faith planting in the middle of the pandemic. Thank you, Jeff, for taking your time to be a part of the post COVID church podcast.

Unknown Speaker 22:35

Thank you. And thanks for all you're doing in the post COVID Church. I've really appreciated it and learned a lot from you. So thank you so much.

Unknown Speaker 22:42

Oh, thank you. That's good to hear. I do appreciate that. The post COVID church helping the church plan and serve the post pandemic world. Thank you for listening. I'm Stuart Kellogg.

Unknown Speaker 22:56

Thank you for listening to the post COVID church podcast. You can find much more at the post COVID church group on Facebook or on the website, the post COVID church.com

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