

2014

An Expression of Faith that Fits (Chapter 8 of Starting Missional Churches)

A.J. Swoboda

George Fox University, aswoboda@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfes>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Swoboda, A.J., "An Expression of Faith that Fits (Chapter 8 of Starting Missional Churches)" (2014). *Faculty Publications - Portland Seminary*. 98.

<https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfes/98>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Portland Seminary at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - Portland Seminary by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

**AN EXPRESSION OF
FAITH THAT FITS
THEOPHILUS CHURCH**

AJ Swoboda

THEOPHILUS CHURCH

Location: Portland, Oregon

Denomination: Foursquare Church

Year of Foundation: 2009

Regular Participants in the Life of the Church: 200

Website: www.theophiluschurch.com

With a wealth of dynamic information regarding the people of his city, Pastor AJ Swoboda, of the Foursquare Church tradition, writes a compelling chapter on planting a church in the unique place of Portland, Oregon. Beginning in their living room, AJ's family pursued God's initiatives by meeting people in a local coffee shop. In three years they have missionally joined God in creating an expression of faith that fits the unique people of Portland. If you are interested in bivocational ministry or how your academic background can equip you for church planting, please continue to read.

**STUMPTOWN JESUS: INTRODUCING OUR PORTLAND
CHURCH-PLANTING STORY**

It's urban legend that Portland, Oregon, boasts more nonprofit organizations and strip clubs per capita than any city in the world. If this is true, it's a city doing the breast stroke in the kiddie pool of paradox. That's where Jesus sent my family and a small group of Christians to live and lay down their lives. What follows is why and how we started a church in Portland, which we call Theophilus.

In 2003 my wife, Quinn, and I became college pastors at a Christian co-op called Onyx House on the campus of the University of Oregon (Eugene). Each Friday evening we'd gather together, worship, break bread, and I'd teach Scripture. Without fail, nearly three hundred people showed up every week to worship Jesus. Then, in 2008, our future took a screeching turn in a radically different direction. On a rainy Saturday afternoon nearly 120 miles north of our home in Eugene, Quinn and I stumbled into Stumptown Coffee Roasters in the Belmont district of Southeast Portland for a cup of coffee.¹ I remember that day in high def. Nursing their various beverages were thirty young people I'd swear to have known as spirit children in pre-earthly existence: tight jeans, dark-rimmed glasses, tattoos on their tattoos, with the palpable scent of cynicism. *I'm looking in a mirror, I thought.* God seemed to be there. Oftentimes when describing that event I resort to speaking as though I'd gotten pregnant, because it's the only way I can begin to approach the feelings I experienced. After returning from that trip to Portland, I spent the better part of the next six months waking up at 3 a.m. with a 3-D picture of Stumptown. That little coffee shop—with the tight jeans, tattoos, dark-rimmed glasses and the rich, sweet coffee scent—was our new land. It was at this time that I had one of my life's few memorable "Abraham moments"—like when God called Abraham from his hometown to a new town known as the Promised Land (Genesis 12)—and within six months we were packing our bags, with a plan to move right next to the coffee shop. After collaborating with our pastor and finding a suitable pastoral replacement, we moved to the land of the tight-jeaned people.

Despite being a lifelong Oregonian, Portland was a foreign land to me.² Many Christians I knew described Portland as a suburb of Sodom, complete with liberals and long-haired fascists from the Green Party living in communes and living on a steady staple of "brownies." Portland is much more

complex than that. Attempts to exalt the multicultural spirit of diversity notwithstanding, Portland is one of the whitest cities in America (87 percent white).³ Portland has one of the largest and most active LGBT communities in America. It boasts the first openly gay mayor (Sam Adams) in US history. Everyone in Portland is a nonconformist like everyone else. The beer flows like wine; thirty-eight microbreweries exist within city limits. People love and embrace the eclectic and the local. One friend calls Portland a city of “Mayberrys”—a city of little villages. You find that no one actually *lives* in the city of Portland; people live in their neighborhoods (e.g., Hawthorne, Elwood or the Mississippi). It’s a very liberal city. Both Ronald Reagan and George Bush called Portland “little Beirut.”

Portland is a religiously odd city. It’s home to both the Church of Elvis and Our Lady of Eternal Combustion Church. Just down the road from us is where Heaven’s Gate, the cult, was started. In this context Portland has staggeringly low numbers of evangelicals and Protestant Christians. Simply put, if it’s organized, it’s struggling. Portland Christians have a knack for being very unique: embracing questions about life and faith, living in the gray areas, and exalting ambiguity in the mystery of the gospel and their own faith expressions. Some evangelical churches have found unique ways of thriving in such eclectic environments. One such church—Imago Dei—is an influential and unique Christian community in Southeast Portland.⁴ Despite some shining successes such as these, it has proven to be a difficult city to plant churches in. A few weeks prior to our move to Portland, a local pastor quietly told me that in the last ten years he’d observed eighty-nine church plants start in Southeast Portland, the very location we were planning to live. God seemed to be calling people to this city.⁵ However, in the local pastor’s recollection, only two of those churches still existed. Like Lewis and Clark, we started our journey with no map but with a bunch of zeal.

THE GENETIC MAKEUP OF A CHURCH CULTURE

From what I remember, I got rather bored of the womb just before birth. I was ready to go. Following the anticipated announcement of our departure, well-meaning Christians began asking Quinn and me questions about something they called *vision*. They’d ask questions about our target market, outreach strategies or discipleship models. Largely this was their way of assessing whether we were sufficiently equipped and ready to plant a church. This created a bit of a

problem for us; we’d been *called* but not *trained* in the complexities and verbiages inherent in the language of church-planting culture. Initially, we tried to alleviate this problem by spending inordinate amounts of time with other church planters, brainstorming creative ways to answer these questions. We met with church planters from other cities, states, even other countries to dialogue about vision. Ultimately, I found these efforts in creating a language about vision both unhelpful and, honestly, a bit manipulative. One problem stood out to me: *How could we create a vision having never lived in Portland, eaten the food, walked the streets or even joked with our mailman?* One particular evening I was struggling to come to grips with why I was feeling frustrated about our lack of vision. Opening my Bible to the beginning of Acts, I read as Jesus tells his disciples to go into Jerusalem and “wait” (*peremenein*) just before his ascension (Acts 1:4). The word *wait* struck me. Considering that Jesus had never taught his disciples on important church-service practices—the two-fast-songs-three-slow-songs set, the greeting time, the announcements and the like—his direction to wait felt like a letdown. Jesus told them to just go and *be* in Jerusalem. Why was this? It’s provocative to note that the command to “hear” and “listen” is uttered some 1,500 times in Scripture. Here in Acts 1 was Jesus’ church-planting vision: wait. And listen. And hear. This made sense in the context of someone like Paul, who would enter a city not finding what he expected (e.g., Acts 16:13), but then, after being there, his task became clear.

This “wait” thing spoke profoundly to me, and in hindsight it was the most obvious thing God did in me in the whole process. Jesus did not send his disciples to Jerusalem to get assessed as potential church planters or to do vision-discernment training sessions, or to get their missional-emergent-eschatological-vision language ingrained. None of that. They went to Jerusalem to receive God’s Spirit. I concluded that the only thing coming close to a church-planting assessment in the New Testament is what we call *Pentecost*. We aren’t called to plant a church so much as we’re called to plant the gospel by being present as Spirit-filled people.⁶ When this conclusion didn’t silence the *vision* seekers, I simply told them to sing “Be Thou My Vision” and then they’d know our vision.

Truthfully, the time with other church planters was irreplaceable and absolutely necessary. However, we came to believe that vision can only be birthed out of time spent with those whom the vision is for. This is humbling. Who doesn’t *want* to have a profound vision that inspires everyone? Sadly,

this was my pride burrowing itself into the cracks of God's calling on my life. Hidden in every calling is a seed of angst. Church planters are sanctified enough to listen to God *and* stupid enough to follow through. I must acknowledge that part of my desire to plant a church was birthed out of frustration with my current context. In one way this is holy, a righteous indignation. Without anger and frustration, Christianity and Protestantism, as well as Apple computers, wouldn't have been birthed. However, in another sense this type of frustration is diabolical. The last thing the church of Jesus Christ needs now is more churches that are "different." What is needed are more *called* churches, churches that God has specifically instigated.

On many levels I was frustrated with my church situation in Eugene. However, all of those frustrations transferred to the new church I was starting. The angst is not in the church—it's in the soul. Church planters must recognize that *they're going to be frustrated wherever they are*. It's in their nature. They're reformers. To be a church planter is to be frustrated, be it with the world, with the church, with the gospel's slow spread or all three. I still believe in reconciling all of our problems within the womb. If we can't do that, the genetic makeup of the church will turn out to be angst. When all is said and done, a church's vision will be a byproduct of how it is born. Based on the whole Acts passage, we simply believed we were called to move to Portland and *peremenein*. To go, and then to wait. The vision would come after we had eaten the food, walked the streets and tipped our mailman.

THE MOVE TO PORTLAND

On a Saturday afternoon in late August 2008, we moved to Portland in our Honda Civic, overpacked with furniture, memories and idealism. Riding into the sunset, we'd no concept of what lay ahead. Some of our packed belongings I wished we'd left behind; chief among them were idealism and some false dreams. I'd heard it said early in the process that it was easier to have babies than to raise the dead.⁷ That is, church planting affords you the opportunity to sidestep many of the problems of pastoring an existing church. *This idea, I've found, is the intellectual property of Satan*. If "easy" is what someone is after, church planting isn't the best option. Despite knowing this, I was convinced of my future fame in Christendom, and convinced that our church plant was going to be "different" and "unique," and that we would woo everyone with our non-conformity and hip ecclesiology. Honestly, hiding in these idealisms is a bigger

problem; it is a failure to grasp that we are not God's solution for the world. Even if our church was "different," it would still die someday. Every church will. It's humbling to acknowledge that not one of the churches Paul planted still exists. Either Paul was a really bad church planter, or he understood that a birth must always be followed, as well as preceded, by a death. Yet I was convinced of our future glories: we'd be the next Mars Hill (pick one of the two); I'd be on the cover of *Christianity Today*; everyone would invite me to speak at their conferences and write in their books. These idealisms, frustrations and false dreams couldn't pad the pain that was soon to come. We were scared to death, and, oddly enough, that was maybe one of the few things we got right.

The relationship between a church plant and its parent congregation is complex and can be messy or tenuous. We were lucky in that our sending church, Eugene Faith Center, sent us out with blessing. Eugene Faith Center is a church within the Foursquare movement, as is Theophilus. However, we are not loud about it. This is by no means because Foursquare is not a good denomination; rather, it's because we've found that in a post-Christian environment like Portland *no one is looking for a Foursquare Church*. No one is looking for church in general.

Eugene Faith Center also gave us some financial support, although it was a very modest amount in church-planting circles. Still, what we lacked in money was more than made up for in friendship and emotional and spiritual support. Oftentimes, church planters feel somewhat neglected by their mother church for various reasons. Steven Johnson writes that if you observe mother ants, you'll notice that the queen will not tell the ants what to do. *She simply births them*. This is central to understanding the loneliness and isolation church planting can bring. Conversely, it is equally important to realize it will not be the mother's job to give direction all the time.⁸ In hindsight, I've come to believe that the latter bears much more importance than the former. Why? Because when everything hits the fan, money doesn't cry with you. Nickels give bad hugs. I've encountered many church plants with endless financial support but no spiritual or emotional support system. I'd trade the money for prayer and friendship any day.

INVITING OTHERS

We began inviting people.⁹ We knew we would need eccentric people for this kind of journey, and Quinn and I felt well prepared in the incubator of

our Eugene years, the home of the University of Oregon (quite the eccentric place in its own right). Nevertheless, this part was tricky, because the only people we invited were those we knew deeply and had a relationship with. Our initial criteria was that they had to be trustable. Another element of our invitation came via a secret we'd been told by a well-experienced church planter. He said *how* you ask people to come will be *how* they leave. If you invite people with language of frustration, they'll leave frustrated. If you invite people out of competition, they'll be apt to leave your church for the hipper one when it arrives. So on and so forth.

We asked people to have the lowest expectations possible. The preacher Clovis Chappell regularly came to mind: "The prize of eternal life is won only by those who dare to give and hazard all they have."¹⁰ Jesus promised blessing for people who sacrificed and left things for the kingdom (Matthew 19:29). We invited with warnings of the hazards, and we told people to prepare for hell. This meant many things. First, don't expect Portland to come to our church because we're finally here. We aren't the Conquistadors. Second, don't expect positions of prominence and power. Expect to serve, bleed and die. Tithe too. Furthermore, don't expect the pastor to spend every minute feeding you deep truths of God. Expect *nothing* but eternal life. Caution signs such as these weeded out the uncalled. I believed, and still do, that if I had to convince people to join, I'd eventually have to convince them to stay. This ultimately set the tone for the group, providing a sense that if anything good did happen out of this church plant, it would be over-the-top exciting. Praying for a month, those who'd been invited decided their fate. Out of thirty, fifteen came. During this period we also created a team we named the "Dream Team." This group of financially stable families were invited to partner with us by supporting us financially for one year. The thinking behind the single year was this: we felt that if it was any longer we wouldn't be required to get off our butts and do hard work of getting jobs and reaching our neighbors. We probably should have asked for more than a year, but by God's grace we were able to be sustainable that first year.

LITURGY AND FOOD

The church was born in our living room on a hot Sunday evening in late August. Our liturgy would be annoyingly simple: we'd bookend our worship gatherings with food. We dreamed of a living room full of people, the smell

of cuisine pervading everything and conversation flowing. First, we'd eat a meal together as a church. Every week. Then we'd worship, read Scripture and pray. Following this, the gathering would conclude with what we hoped would be the highest moment of the gathering: Eucharist. No one could say they didn't get fed. *Literally*.

Being a part of the Pentecostal tradition, this was a bit reactionary on our behalf. I'd found that in Pentecostalism and most forms of Protestant worship the sermon, not the Eucharist, is considered the highest moment in the service. As I did not find this to be normative either in Scripture or in the history of the church, we did it differently. One initial question we had to wrestle with was whether we would allow wine in our church gatherings. Historically speaking, grape juice in liturgy is rather new, going back only to the eighteenth century. However, in Portland, alcoholism is rampant. For this reason, we chose early on that our gatherings would include grape juice, not wine.¹¹

Our first gathering primarily consisted of those who'd moved from Eugene. The reason for this was quite simple: our marketing department stunk. Because we didn't name the church for an entire year, the only means of invitation came through friendship and personal invitation. Still, in a short time our numbers grew: the seed members brought friends, and then friends brought friends. You get the picture. This relational approach, as one can imagine, proved to be incredibly important for us, and I'm still very proud of this. We never handed out a single piece of paper or business card. The people of our city, similar to those in proximity to the early church, couldn't say "Let's go to Theophilus." They could only say, "Hey, let's go to dinner at that place where they eat a lot and talk about Jesus." I should also mention we'd discovered that Portland people love all things unmarketed (e.g., people love the alternative rock concert that's the hardest to find). The best concerts are those held in a living room with only twenty people and that wasn't advertised in the paper. Portlanders eat this stuff up. For them, marketing ruins it. Hence, we followed suit.

The genetic makeup of our gatherings was centered on a few ideas, foremost of which were as follows: we would strive to practice radical hospitality and cloying honesty. People, whoever they were—gay, straight, black, white, Republican, Democrat, tongue speaker, cessationist—could come and be themselves. The caveat was that if we could come as ourselves, then God had the same permission. So while people came as they were,

regardless of race, sexuality or creed, they were asked to be willing to encounter a God whose Son could change us right where we were. Doing this created space for a lot of screwed-up people who'd never otherwise go to church. We had no grand delusions that theological uniformity led to orthodoxy. Rather, we believed that as the church gathered in the presence of Jesus, he would change us all by being himself and being worshiped as himself. Because, for us, Jesus himself *is* orthodoxy. If Jesus accepted us for who we were, then we owed him the same posture.

SLOW GROWTH

We saw almost no growth for three months, aside from a few friends of friends. I called those we did draw the "young and the restless"—those either in or just out of college, the 18-25 crowd, who generally had a bone to pick with *the Man*. Frustrated, cynical, sporting tight jeans and dark-rimmed glasses—they were exactly the people at Stumptown. Because our initial thrust was with these sorts of folk, we found it very difficult to retain anyone with wrinkles, which, as it were, was not much of a surprise. I had expected to reach people ten years older and younger than myself. Yet this created a problem. First, old people did not feel like they had a place. I recall one such visitor calling us a "glorified college group." This was basically true. The second problem was I began to feel ashamed of our youthfulness, as though it was a problem to be fixed. One evening we read together as a church Paul's first letter to Timothy. In it he told his *padawan* Timothy, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young" (1 Timothy 4:12). Paul told him this because his was a multigenerational church and he was inordinately young. I believed that commandment not only meant that Timothy should not look down on himself, nor should he let anyone else do so, but that a church had no right to look down on itself or any other congregation for its age or youthfulness. Eventually we embraced ourselves being young as simply the way Jesus had created us.

The third problem was purely practical. In developing things like eldership, it required us to be creative. For nearly six months I studied and prayed about the biblical model of eldership found in the Pauline literature. What I found surprised me. In parallel passages (Titus 1:5-7; 1 Timothy 3:1-7), Paul gives seemingly two different lists of expectations regarding the character of elders. To one, Timothy, he instructs him to not allow elders who

were new believers. However, in his list to Titus, Paul omits this commandment. This was for one reason. *The church Titus pastored was new and very young*. This gave us hope; even in Scripture there is room for still-developing and imperfect ecclesial models.

Week after week we'd meet on Sunday evenings and worship Jesus and wait. We found out very soon that church planters have to eat too. Because we began the church with very modest funding, I was required to be bivocational.¹² For a living, I taught biblical studies, theology and church history full time at five local universities and Bible colleges. Because my PhD had been completed, it afforded me an opportunity to make a living as a professor. Frankly, this was wonderful. I loved being able to go to church after a long week of work and sit down and pray with someone whose boss had been a jerk that week and be able to sympathize. Indeed, I could sympathize. It also gave me the chance to spend time with people who I didn't pastor. It is as difficult as can be to be a pastor in a city like Portland. Inform someone on the street about that line of work and you can expect the conversation to end. It's got to the point now that I don't even tell people I'm a pastor; rather, I tell them I run a nonprofit with a really well-known CEO. When they hear I run a nonprofit, they're totally into me.

There was another aspect of this that made being bivocational a holy venture for me. *I love the idea that as their pastor I have other stuff going on in my life aside from the church*. Having bigger problems than the church freed me up to have a life. This became a church mantra. We wanted to be a church where everyone had bigger problems in their life outside the church. Having another job allowed me to incarnate this mantra. I'd teach and study during the week, prepare sermons in the evenings and on breaks, and do pastoral care and evangelism all day Saturday. Though it was crazy, it was never short of excitement. In teaching I could work out my theology for a paycheck, and in pastoring I could work it out for love.

We communally decided on some principles toward finances. Since day one, our goal was to be sustainable and locally supported by those in the church. How would we do this? To begin, we never passed a plate. We had a small shoebox in the back of the room for people to put their money in. I was brutally honest with our church about money. I had to be. Again, I wanted to eat. Some churches tell guests they don't have to give anything. We told guests to give because we didn't know if they were coming back.

Finally, we made the commitment to give our first 10 percent away to social justice needs (e.g., feeding the poor, caring for widows) and the second 10 percent to our denomination to support other church plants. Sadly, I quickly learned that those who gave the least were the ones who complained the most. I resolved to not let this bother me. Some months we had enough, some we didn't, but never, at any point, did Jesus leave us hanging.

The neighborhood we moved into was as weird as our team. The Hawthorne district is known for its oddness. Our approach was be simple: we'd move into the neighborhood and spend our lives living, serving and knowing people by name. At first our gatherings on Sunday evening became a sticking point because the parking in our neighborhood was so limited. One evening we went door-to-door to meet our neighbors and ask their permission to park in front of their houses. This gave us the chance to meet many of them, and we discovered our immediate neighborhood reflected the diversity of Portland. In the immediate space next to our house were atheists, a gay couple, a Roman Catholic family and a young firefighter who was never home. As opposed to doing flyers and inviting people to church, we believed (as we still do) that our greatest impact would be twofold: first, we would be there a very long time and actually know our neighbors; second, we would never presume we are just there for them. That is, we would try to allow that maybe our neighbors have been sent by God for us, and that *we* were to be changed by *them*. On Sunday evenings we would talk specifically about one important factor in ministry: reciprocity. Not only did we come to serve and know our neighbors, but they were sent to us so that we might learn the love of Christ.

CALL US LOVER OF GOD

We still didn't have a name. An ancient tradition holds that Jews often refused to name a child for a long time because the child's character should determine his or her name. We wanted our name to come after seeing the character of our church. This, however, created a setback, in that many people, once they started showing up, found it deeply impractical to say they were going to someone's house for church. Their friends and family grew concerned they were part of a cult. Though we disliked inconveniences such as this, there were inherent benefits to not having a name. The minute you have a name, you're Google-able. People can write reviews of your church. For this reason we believed it was essential to withhold our public

face. In a way, we developed a Messianic Secret approach toward church planting.¹³ By that I mean we actively sought to stay out of the public light. Jesus did this all the time in the Gospels, while also instructing individuals against telling his story. Because no one could Google us, almost no one left a church to come to ours. Any of the people who were really angry at their particular church didn't leave it and then bring their anger to ours.

Eventually it was time to name our church; there's only so long that people can refer to their church as "that place where we go to eat down the street." We got our title from the books of Luke and Acts. For the entire first year of our existence we read the book of Acts to watch and see how the Holy Spirit leads the church. It's worth remembering that each of the Bible's works were penned for a particular person or community in a particular time and for a particular reason. First and Second Timothy were both written to an ill-equipped and underaged pastor on how to keep the church he led from losing its mission and heart. Revelation was written by an apostle named John while he was stranded on a distant island called Patmos; it was addressed to a number of churches for whom God had a specific message. The first letter to the Corinthians was written to a church that had got caught up in some rather awkward sexual and dietary practices that made even their idols cringe. Interestingly, the largest portion of the New Testament was written by a Gentile named Luke, who addressed it to a near-anonymous guy named Theophilus. All we know about Theophilus is his Greek name and his apparent willingness to fork up enough money to personally commission two major books in the Bible on very expensive papyrus: the Gospel of Luke and its companion Acts. Theophilus means two things: "lover of God" and "loved by God." It's a name that conveys reciprocity, like a two-way street. Other than his name, Theophilus is a mystery (see Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-2). We liked the idea of the mysterious man of anonymity who loved and was loved by God, and who desperately wanted to hear more of these stories about Jesus. Thus, the name stuck.

We continued the first year in the hard but gratifying work. One week felt like Good Friday; the next like Easter. We oscillated between the hell of death and the joys of resurrection, along with everything in between. After our first year, the first couple left the church. If that experience is prescriptive of how things go in church planting, the first people to leave the church will scar you. I should have been more prepared. All the books pre-

dicted it, calling the initial team “the scaffolding people,” and this metaphor accurately describes the usefulness of these people. However, it doesn’t live up to either their value or how hard it is to lose them. If people are just scaffolding, we might walk all over them to get to the top, and then break them down and give them away when we are done with them. It seems to me that, in this utilitarian stance, if we think of people as scaffolding we will treat them as such. *Yet how in the world could scaffolding hurt me so much?* It can’t, because people aren’t scaffolding. People are people. Every single one of them counts. Which is why it *still* hurts when people leave the church. The book of Jonah got me through that particular month or so. In reading the story of Jonah, I discovered that while God does send missionaries to reach a city like Nineveh, often God sends a missionary in order to reach that specific person. God sends church planters that *they* might get saved. God sends missionaries to reach the missionaries themselves. So when the people who helped start a church leave, hopefully it is done with grace from them as much as from the church. It is a wonderful opportunity to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12 NIV).

Leadership must be built. After three months I asked fifteen or so of the people who appeared to be both sane and saved to serve on a small leadership team I was calling *Communitas*. This gave me time to devote to leadership development, assignment giving and gifting discernment. In regard to leadership I found it difficult to see how much of the church-planting literature used metaphors that I was not comfortable with. Church-planting literature often uses the metaphor of the missile and rocket: When are you *launching*? What is your *target* audience? When are you *pulling the trigger*? I think the metaphor should resemble that of the movie *Little Miss Sunshine*: we would all get in the van together with the awkward son, the loud and annoying grandpa, the aspiring girl, the balanced mother and the multilevel marketing father, and then just go. Because by being in the van long enough, we’d fall in love with each other. That is how we developed leaders. Putting opposites together, giving them assignments and telling them Jesus was in it all.

LIKE ADAM ASLEEP: THE STORIES OF A CHURCH PLANT

Too many stories came out of this journey. Three brief ones stand out. The first is a story about God’s provision. In the founding of any church, people will inevitably come from other churches and, invariably, they can’t *not*

compare your church with their old one. A great challenge arises with those who have come to start the church because often they will have great fondness for the place they have left. These people will talk about how wonderful their old church was, and in so doing will come across as though they are judging their new situation. I remember seeing someone in our church listening to a podcast from our parent church, and I felt angry. I thought, *Aren’t my sermons good enough?* Church planting is kryptonite to pride. Even though the book of Ecclesiastes warns against praising the past, we all do it (Ecclesiastes 7:10). We praise the past, bemoan the present and anticipate the future. Learning to live in the now requires people of encouragement, people who can let the now be what it is and find joy in it.

The first family from Portland that joined the church was that for us. Joe and Asena Kurkinen were bold enough to bring their two children and a healthy dose of encouragement to our community. God sent them, I believe, to us that we might find hope in the now. Sadly, it is impossible to go out and find a couple like this. They can’t be found; they can only be called. I still believe the best things come when we don’t look for them, like Adam sleeping and waking up with a new wife. Along the way God has done this in one form or another. The Kurkinens came from God. Every church planter will have a Kurkinen sent to them. When God does this, spend *too* much time with them. When you have a baby, it is important to be very careful about *who* you let hold your baby. If they are sick, they’ll get your baby sick. God will send some healthy people like the Kurkinens so that you aren’t the only one holding your newborn. Eventually, of the initial fifteen who moved from Eugene to help begin the church, six would leave—two out of frustration and four for new jobs. The rest are still with us. The Kurkinens, sent by God, created for us a sense of stability that helped us sleep at night.

Another story came early on during our first Halloween in Portland. It had been a couple of extremely rough weeks. Very few people were coming to the church, finances sucked and I was getting very discouraged. On Halloween we threw our neighborhood a huge party for the kids to come and have fun. We planned to have different rooms set up in our houses that were themed, along with great food and music for the parents, plus a culminating dance party at the end. Tons of neighborhood kids came and had a blast. Near the end of the dance party, at about nine at night, we noticed that one of the neighborhood kids of about thirteen was dancing by himself in the

corner of the room. Now, it is important to understand my wife for this story to make sense. She has felt compelled since day one to know all of the kids in our neighborhood by name. Among these kids she'd gotten to know was the one dancing in the corner of the room, Alex, who lived across the street from us. Honestly, it was kind of awkward. With about thirty college students dancing, there is one thirteen-year-old kid dancing by himself in the corner of the room. Fun, but nonetheless awkward. All of a sudden Alex left, walking out of our front door. Quinn followed to see where he was going. As she went to see where he was from the front porch of our house, she could see him walking back across the street with another kid from the neighborhood to come to the party. At this point Alex was evangelizing his friends to come over to the dance party. As Alex strolled across the street, Quinn called out to him saying, "Alex, get over here and dance with us." As she did so, she could hear Alex say to his friend (Theo) as they came toward our house, "You see: here, *they know my name*."

I resolved that day to believe that God is in the small things. Simply knowing a few names is a sign that the kingdom's water is breaking. Perhaps in Texas, when you don't go to church, people ask, "What's wrong with you?" In Portland, when you go to church, people ask, "What's wrong with you?" Because of this, we can't expect people to come to church. We must be willing to engage Jesus outside church, like Alex did in the street outside our house.

The last small story has to do with our neighborhood high school: Cleveland High. Our relationship with Cleveland began at an interesting time in the life of the church. The first year of the church we spent what I felt was an inordinate amount of time focusing on the church. In hindsight I think this is necessary. Keep in mind that one-year-olds are selfish humans, and everyone is focused on them in the earliest years of their life. As they grow up, we focus less and less attention on them. This is no different in the life of a church. A baby requires a ton of attention. As we were finishing our first year, I was feeling as though we needed to break out of our season of self-focus and find more creative ways to serve our city. Cleveland is classic Portland. I initiated a meeting with the principal to find any creative ways that we might serve their school with no strings attached. They, rightfully so, were not interested in proselytizing Christians sharing their message after serving. The principal asked if we would do some yard work for them that needed to be done for parent-teacher conferences. So we did. We

Interview Q&A 1

Editors: You consistently engage with your neighborhood. How have the voices of neighbors helped you see something, shifted your imagination or clarified what God calls you to?

AJ Swoboda: Our neighbors taught us what we know. I think of the evangelist John Wesley who was widely known for being a voracious reader. On bumpy horseback, Wesley would ride from town to town to preach the gospel of Christ to anyone who'd dare hear. Being on horseback as much as he was gave him ample time to read. And read he did. Wesley was popularly known to have read whole volumes on horseback as he prepared sermons for the next town. Often, he'd read the books of those he knew he'd be preaching to. Why? In the back of his mind Wesley knew he couldn't preach effectively without knowing intimately the different questions of each town. Without knowing it, his audience taught him what he needed to preach.

Our neighbors have taught us more about the dynamics of the gospel than I could explain. Like Jonah, the stories of the Ninevites have taught us a shocking amount about God's grace, love and power.

Two of our neighbors taught us about the beauty of hospitality and the gospel. During our first month in the house, a sweet, older couple who'd just moved from Alaska provided unsolicited hospitality one afternoon, including, food, conversation and a pack of microbrews. They taught us that the gospel is sometimes unsolicited grace. We'll never forget them.

Another set of neighbors taught us the value of covenant love. Over the period of six months, we painstakingly watched a wife across the street care compassionately for her dying husband. After his passing, our church was able to share some love and space with her. But it was her love for her husband that taught us a beautiful lesson of God's love for the church and our calling to covenant love in marriage.

brought nearly seventy-five people, rakes and gloves, and made the place sparkling. They were so happy and have asked if we would be open to doing mentoring in their school. I think Jesus is in this.

I'LL FOLLOW YOU INTO THE DARK: OUR FUTURE

It's been nearly four years. Whew. I feel as though we have been led into the dark. That said, we will keep following Jesus into the dark. What is important for Theophilus as we move forward? I would suggest that three core theological convictions remain that we believe will carry us into the future. First, we cling to a very strong and pronounced theology of Pentecost. We believe that Acts 2 doesn't expire. The Spirit, which fell on the gathered postresurrection followers of Christ, keeps on falling. For us, this means women are anointed and have not only permission but encouragement to speak in the church. The gifts of the Spirit (e.g., tongues, prophecy, love) are all central points of importance for those endowed with God's Spirit. This is the presence of Christ in his church: the *Christus praesans*.

Second, we hold to a unique conviction that the Spirit is not only alive today in our midst but *has been* alive in the history of the church for centuries past. We call ourselves Anglicostals: Pentecostals swimming in the history and tradition of Anglicanism. Sadly, Pentecostal and charismatic spirituality can often lead to a spiritual framework that garners little or no respect toward all the wonderful stuff that comes out of the Christian tradition. Our approach is to hold to and respect both the historical movements and the movement of the Spirit in the life of the community. I want people to be a part of our community and to be infected with a desire to live the Spirit-filled life *and* see the role of the Spirit in the beautiful history of the church. In this way we are restorationist and nonrestorationist, holding both in tension. The Spirit is restoring us all into the now by helping us understand our place in the history and family of the church.

Third, we desire to practice a missional approach based on "faithful presence."¹⁴ We are not going anywhere until told otherwise. We are called to our neighborhood, to Stumptown, to Cleveland High and to Alex. There are various expressions of this commitment in our midst. First, I don't conceive of this church as my steppingstone; I am not using it to move higher in the Christian ladder of success. If that were the case, I have every confidence

Interview Q&A 2

Editors: Your Communitas group, along with others, are your leadership. Tell us how God has used their connections, perspectives and creativity to shape your life in the Stumptown.

AJ Swoboda: In the course of three years after the church's founding, we've attempted to flatten our leadership as best as possible. Church planting naturally makes this difficult—especially if the church planters are an individual or a couple. We refused the CEO model. Through tedious research, prayer and contemplation, we constructed a communal ecclesial model that makes room for the voices and perspectives of the Jesus-loving people in our church, voices that are sometimes very prophetic. Today, this includes deacons (service oriented) and elders (leadership oriented) who lead alongside myself and the staff. Our lay leadership team, Communitas, consists of any leader currently serving and helping shape the genetic makeup of our community.

While this flattening has been integral, I've quickly discovered a looming challenge remains in being a visionary who can prophetically create space for the vision of those around you. Single-minded visions never capture more than one mind. As hard as it may be, bringing others alongside myself to make decisions, shape vision and dream theologically is paramount within the participatory culture of our time. While many leaders have vision, few are visionaries. The first sees things. The second gives others a pair of glasses. Communitas has beautifully undermined my own personal leadership ignorance.

One leader, Katie, in the middle of a Communitas meeting raised her shaking hand to share she feared our community had forgotten to pray for our city. In response, I asked her if she'd lead us into a fuller prayer life. She's now the deacon of prayer life in our church.

Another leader, Luke, has perpetually reminded me of his frustration with our liturgical shallowness. He's been able to do so because there is an open-door policy to share thoughts, frustrations and encouragements with me. Because of his voice, we now have a deacon of liturgical life whose job is to create communal sacred spaces.

in the people in the church, who are too smart and would call me out on it. Even more so, we are called to our neighborhoods for a very long time. What keeps a church missional? What keeps it from moving to a realm of something else? In the words of Seth Godin, it seems clear to me that church planters, like lizards, get hungry, scared, angry and horny.¹⁵ When things get tough, we all want to flee. We go into protective mode when we're afraid, hiding under rocks. I am committed to stay.

I remember that in the story of the *Odyssey*, when the ship is passing the Sirens' island, Odysseus commands the sailors to tie him to the mast so he can hear their enchanting song without leading the ship to crash into the rocks. He tells them that no matter what he might utter when he hears the song, they must *not listen to him*. After pouring beeswax in the sailors ears, he is tied to the mast and they sail by. He hears the Sirens' song and they survive. I was listening to this guy talk about how psychologists call the mast a "commitment device," something you tie yourself to when you have a cool head so that you make good decisions when you have a hot head.¹⁶ Locking a credit card away. Putting your credit card in ice. Canceling your Internet account to be free from porn. We do these because there are two heads in all people. We all have two selves. The present self is Odysseus wanting to just live in the moment, hearing the song. The other self wants to retire with his wife Penelope in Ithaca, what we might call the future self. Why do we need commitment devices? Because we are all tempted. Resisting the temptation to flee to brighter pastures or the suburbs is hard; there is more money and better buildings there. We, however, feel called to the city. God's mission is our commitment device. We are convinced that Jesus needs us and wants us in this beautiful city. Alex is our commitment device. Cleveland High is our commitment device. Stumptown is our commitment device. Our neighborhood is our commitment device. Because love is what church planting is all about.

We have many commas in our story, and much unfinished business. In the next few months we are initiating deacons and elders in the life of the church. We are continuing to eat together and will know we have outgrown our place if there is no room around the table. We are working to serve with Cleveland High in any way they desire. All of these will come and go. Yet at the end of the day, we love our city. This strange little kiddy pool called Portland is where we are learning to swim.