



Leading Missional Change Case Study

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Pig or chicken?

Overview

Lighthouse Fellowship had grown over the past year to about 65 in worship on a weekly basis, meeting in a community recreation center. The pastor wanted to push the congregation into a public launch phase, beginning with a well-advertised worship service in a local elementary school. The extent of the launch with marketing and infrastructure would require leveraging virtually all of the congregation's savings. Many of the leaders were against the move.

The meeting

It was one of the most sobering meetings Jeff Richards had been a part of in the past year. Planting a church was difficult work. And when key leaders expressed concern over direction or thoughts of leaving, it took fortitude squared to stay the course...especially when those same voices were fervent supporters in the past.

Recently a number of leaders had expressed reservation about Jeff's desire to push the congregation towards a public launch. A number had come to him privately; a few had expressed their concern publicly. But today's meeting with Wes Martin—one of the leaders who had also coached Jeff over the past year—deposited another layer of doubt in Jeff's head.

Wes and his wife Monica were one of the founding couples, present a year before Jeff and his family arrived. An engineer by training, Wes was a straight-forward, no nonsense guy. A life-long Presbyterian, he and Monica were seeking a different kind of Presbyterian church. They had tried a number of other congregations in the area but for a number of reasons never felt at home. So for the year and a half before Jeff's family moved to the Phoenix suburb of Surprise, the Martins had met monthly with four or five other couples praying and studying, wondering what God had in store.

Jeff's arrival marked the beginning of a new season, one filled with action and movement. Now, just a little over a year after Jeff's family moved to town, major conflict was surfacing among some of the leaders. A number of those individuals were major donors.

Presbyterians in Surprise

Surprise, Arizona was one of the fastest growing suburbs in America. Located about 30 miles northwest of downtown Phoenix, the Surprise area was anticipated to continue a rapid growth path for decades. With an excellent school district, booming economy, and arid climate,

While based on true circumstances, this case was prepared for class discussion and learning. Some names and situations have been altered.

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Surprise was a family-friendly mecca, with young families arriving every day. By all definitions, it was the perfect place to plant a church.

The Presbyterian Church had not started a church in the Phoenix area for over a decade, however. While the Assemblies of God, Baptist, and Bible-based community church plants had flourished, typical to mainline practice the Presbyterians were last in the door. This was due in part to a previous strategy of aggressively purchasing a number of advance sites for churches. When land prices plummeted and the planned communities failed to materialize, the state-wide synod lost tremendous money...and credibility. The failed strategy resulted in a moratorium in planting long after the population growth rebounded.

Internal battles also existed within the local Presbyterian congregations. Some of those battles revolved around the role of women in the church. Most of them focused on style of worship and what was appropriate, especially regarding music. Adding more conflict and confusion into the mix, these congregations came from two Presbyterian denominations that differed in significant issues. The largest denomination—Presbyterian Church USA [PC (USA)]—maintained a more liberal interpretation of the Bible and allowed the ordination of women into the pastoral office. It also wrestled publicly with ordaining homosexuals and appeared to be moving in that direction. The other denomination—Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)—took a more strict interpretation, ordaining only men.

These differences played out in this new plant because while the plant was conservative in its theology—it belonged to the PCA—it worshipped in a progressive format designed for those with little to no church background. Especially not a PCA background. Thus there was some confusion among the PCA congregations as to just how theologically conservative Jeff and his ministry would be. In addition, most of the news in the public focusing on Presbyterians dealt with the social liberality of the PC (USA). While the news did not directly relate to the new plant, the public perception was that all Presbyterians believed the same thing. The planting team wrestled with how to avoid that confusion.

Ultimately it became a naming issue. After months of prayer and discussion, the group chose Lighthouse Presbyterian Fellowship. Some of the leaders felt Presbyterian should be included in the name: “We are Presbyterian. We should be proud of that.” Jeff disagreed but decided not to lose the war over it. After a few months, however, he and other leaders realized that in addition to the public mis-perception about what their branch of Presbyterianism believed, the Presbyterian label also caused many to not consider Lighthouse as a potential church home. “I’m not Presbyterian so that church is not for me.” The decision was then made to drop Presbyterian from the name, calling the church simply Lighthouse Fellowship.

Think ‘team’

Jeff and his wife Terese had often discussed doing mission work. Natives of Arizona they had considered serving in Mexico or Latin America but that dream never materialized. For nine years they served two congregations in the northwest. In both congregations Jeff functioned as Pastor of Outreach while also serving in a variety of other roles including youth, small groups, and executive pastor. In all of his roles he began ministries, seeking to build lay teams that would sustain them when he left. These years brought him a range of experiences that would later serve him well, but they also made him a believer in team. And since the only foreign mission model he was aware of focused on one missionary “parachuting” into the area, with no immediate people support, he grew to think mission work was not in his future.

That all changed one fall, however, when he took part in evaluating a local planter's mission plan. The metaphor the planter employed was that of a restaurant. "If you were going to start a restaurant, you'd at least have two staff, maybe three: a chef, a waiter, and a cashier." His plan was built on launching a congregation with a team. That model gave Jeff a different vision for how to do mission.

He approached the Arizona synod, wanting to plant a church in his home state. The denomination wanted to plant a church in Surprise. Jeff was brought in for an interview with denominational leadership. He in turn requested an interview with the bishop, where he laid out a three-pronged request: That the new congregation could worship in whatever style it wanted, in order to reach unchurched people; that the launch could be a "large-start," led by a multi-staff team (as opposed to a solo pastor); and that the denomination would purchase land for the congregation to give it a good footing from the start.

The bishop agreed to the worship style request, stating that worship format is a congregational decision. He agreed to the multi-staff start "if you can figure out how to fund it." But the land request warranted more conversation. "How much land are you thinking?" "At least forty acres," answered Jeff. "Forty acres allows for thousands of people worshipping at one time since one of the key limiters is parking." Jeff left the conversation with the amount of land unresolved. At least he had planted a seed.

Six months later Jeff received the appointment to serve as mission planter for Surprise, Arizona. Two months after that, in January, he and his family moved to Surprise and joined six couples and their children, anxious to see what God had in store.

January through August

Upon arriving in Surprise, Jeff continued the meeting schedule the group had in place. They met every other Friday evening for prayer and study, focusing on understanding the unchurched person and his needs. Early in the process Jeff also introduced possible core values for the new ministry, along with the mission and vision for the plant. He had gathered ideas over the years and now had a forum for sharing them. While he tried to present "straw models," he had strong opinions about the direction he felt the congregation should go. Thus some of the launch group felt somewhat disenfranchised after Jeff's arrival, with his strong driver style.

One early conflict was whether or not the new congregation would have an elementary school. A number of the families in the initial group had joined with that hope in mind. They possessed a strong passion for parochial education. After conducting an independent marketing analysis and creating a business plan for the elementary school, it was determined to be financially unviable. By that point the team had also narrowed their focus to unchurched people and creating a Christian school with annual tuition near \$10,000 would limit the market to those families with strong Christian values, presumably those already having a church home. Since that was not the congregation's target, the elementary school was not pursued. This caused lingering disappointment in a number of the launch team.

One such individual was Robert Harris, the de-facto leader and "pastor" of the initial group. Someone once told Jeff, "Whoever is the 'pastor' of the people who are there before you arrive, he's still their pastor after you arrive. It will take time, lots of love, and wise decisions before they will give you that mantle." That was certainly true of Robert. When he spoke, everyone listened. Plus he was about 20 years older than Jeff, which did not help Jeff's confidence. Jeff made sure that he discussed items with Robert frequently. While they disagreed on the final outcome of the school decision, Robert understood financial realities. However, there was one

situation—the hiring of the music minister—where Jeff went against Robert’s opinion. Thankfully Robert respected Jeff’s position and ultimately supported him.

As a way to involve the group in the foundational future decisions, Jeff introduced weekday “work on the ministry” meetings with members of the team who could attend. They focused on marketing of the new ministry, finding the two other staff members of the team: a worship leader and an administrative assistant, and beginning to design the worship experience.

By March, the seven-family launch team lobbied for weekly worship as a group. Up to this point, they were all attending their respective home congregations—five different ones in all. They were ready to cut those ties and begin house-church worship. Jeff, however, was concerned that weekly worship would take his energy away from being out in the community and focus him too inwardly. Everything he had read encouraged him to wait on public worship because the message prep would take up too much of his week. He wanted to do things well and a message would often take 15-20 hours of preparation. He was not convinced that was the best use of his time at this phase.

As Easter approached the pressure became too great, however. A compromise was reached: the group would worship every other week in someone’s home. On those Sundays, Jeff would preach and introduce the type of music he thought the church would have. He did this using a cd player. Everyone joked that he played a mean cd and agreed he should not lead the singing. One of the women in the group, Jenny Byers, had a beautiful voice and had sung in nightclubs, so she helped with the worship leading. It became clear early on, however, the group would need to hire someone to lead this important part of the ministry.

On the opposite Sundays, the team worshiped in one of the local congregations, discovering what God was doing in the community. Afterwards they would eat lunch or dinner together, debriefing from the experience. The goal was simple: determine what God is not doing so that they could bring a new and needed worship experience to the community. For many in the group, this was the first time they had worshiped in another denomination. It greatly opened their eyes to the differing expressions of Christian worship and helped to bond the group together into one focus.

Jeff also preached anytime he had the opportunity. When he did, the entire launch team would go with him in order to meet people and talk about the ministry. Some of those preaching locations were in the vicinity of the new plant. Others were thirty minutes to an hour away. Whenever he preached, he always asked for names of potential members and prayer partners, and, if the host congregation allowed, money. While dollars were always welcome, it was the prayer partners and names that blessed the group the most. Almost always someone knew someone who lived out in Surprise. All names were added to the database. The prayer partners received a quarterly partner newsletter. The potential members were contacted first by mail then by phone call and if willing, face-to-face. They also received a monthly newsletter about the ministry.

Through these efforts, the group slowly began to grow. “Help us launch a new kind of church” was the mantra. They invited friends and contacts to house-church worship. By July, the group numbered almost 30, outgrowing the largest home. People also began requesting weekly worship. In August Jeff finally gave in, and they moved into a community recreation center to worship every Sunday. The location was not great—it was off the beaten path. But it was almost free and would allow for growth into the 60s or 70s.

A Large Church in a Small Church's Body

Since Jeff's past ministry experience took place solely in large churches, he approached Lighthouse in the same manner, seeking to position it so that it would grow as large as God wanted with minimal changes along the way. He routinely reminded the group they were a large church in a small church's body. In this way he continually kept the desired future front and center.

He had also been taught that the longer a plant remains under 200 in worship—especially in a suburban setting like Surprise—the more likely it would never grow past that number. Under 200, a guest in worship is more easily noticeable and potentially assaulted. Upon discovering the congregation has existed for say 10 years with only 115 in worship, the initial thought would be, "Something is wrong here. Why is it not growing?" 'Small' becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Sociological factors play hard and heavy.

Thus Jeff positioned the weekly worship experience as "launch team" worship. It was worship for a purpose, namely to prepare for launch. It was not the final product nor the ultimate size or location. They were on a journey. They had not arrived yet. The sermons reinforced this season, focusing on values and what it looked like to love the community. In many ways the group was learning a new way to worship.

During this time the group also learned new ways to reach the community. The philosophy was three-pronged: go to where the people already gathered; go as a group so that the experience was shared; and give people something they did not expect to receive but that they could immediately use. This resulted in giveaways of water bottles on hot desert soccer fields, ice cold sodas on street corners, and coffee and hot chocolate at metro bus stations during the holidays. No donations were allowed, which made the event memorable to the recipient. And the event was limited to no more than two hours, making it manageable for volunteers on a busy Saturday. The outcome was high impact, low threat and led to a growing awareness of Lighthouse in the community.

Funding

From the beginning Jeff sought to build the ministry on the gifts of the worshipers. In his final interview before taking the position he asked every team member for a financial commitment, teaching on Luke 14 and the building of the tower: "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'" (Luke 14:28-30 NIV) From the beginning all in the launch team were expected to contribute sacrificially in both time and money.

After one of the early meetings, after a Bible study on Malachi 3 and God's promise of pouring blessing upon people as they were faithful in committing the tithe to the local congregation, one of the leaders pulled Jeff aside. David Travis was a high level financial manager in a local corporation. Everything he touched succeeded. And through his wife, he was growing in his walk with Christ. This tithe discussion was new. David was fiscally conservative. But he realized how blessed he was, and the call to return a portion of that blessing was compelling. Then and there he committed over \$20,000 annually to the ministry, one of the top three annual donations. Jeff was elated.

The ministry plan would entail more than \$20,000, however. The ministry had approximately \$30,000 in savings, and offerings were collected weekly. The denomination had

agreed to fund Jeff's position for at least a year. It was also open to co-signing on the land note and providing grant dollars. The grant amount was never known until February of a given year, however, since other ministries also requested financial support. So while the strong possibility that denominational funding would happen as long as things progressed positively, there was no guarantee. This uncertainty led to increased concern in the leadership as staff and infrastructure were added, especially as Jeff began to express his desire to move from the recreation center to a larger, more accessible facility.

How much risk?

In October of the first year, the worship leader and his family arrived. A gifted musician, Sammy Lincoln shared the same values as Jeff. He also brought organizational gifts, involving people from day one. He was a true people-mover.

"You have six months to find and build a worship band," Jeff told him. "I want us to launch Palm Sunday. That way we will also have a good repeat Sunday on Easter." No musicians existed in the launch team. But the adage proved true: great musicians love to play with great musicians. Sammy hit the streets, advertising a "Sunday morning gig: drummer, guitar and bass needed." His great networking skills immediately led him to a number of individuals. There was never a doubt the band would be ready.

Sammy also set out to solicit and purchase all of the equipment necessary for this next phase: a trailer, sound system, staging, children's ministry furniture, etc. The capital needs totaled a little over \$30,000.

Another \$15,000 was needed for marketing. Jeff's plan was to gather a large crowd from the community for the public launch on Palm Sunday. To do that would take multiple contacts. In Jeff's research early on, he had learned that the PC-USA would not allow a launch to happen without 10,000 contacts having been made in the community. That goal was partly behind the multiple coke and water giveaways throughout the first year. But Jeff knew something intense and huge would be needed to create momentum so that the group could make a successful jump to a new facility with more people.

He had participated in a phone campaign before and decided to use that method to make the launch successful. The goal would be to phone 15,000 residents in the Surprise community, seeking people who had no church home. Each of those who did not have a church and were open to receiving information about Lighthouse would then receive five pieces of mail about the ministry over a six week period, concluding with a phone call inviting to the Palm Sunday worship service. They would also be asked to bring cookies for afterwards, immediately involving them in owning part of the ministry.

The campaign's original plan called for the phoning to take place over four weeks. With limited people and a desire to create more momentum more quickly, however, Jeff, his wife Terese and a team devised a one-week proposal. They found a local insurance office with fifteen phone lines and recruited volunteers from local congregations in addition to their own. Using a script and a cross-reference directory, they planned to dial the homes in seven evenings in February. The campaign program assured them of a 10% return rate, which would identify approximately 1,500 homes. From that they could create a database of people who were open to receiving more information.

The plan was not without risk. What if the phone was not a good tool in this community? What if they couldn't get the volunteers to come help? And was this a wise use of such a large

proportion of the group's savings? The reality was existing funds were not going to last long if the launch did not result in a dramatic increase in attendance. The February attendance averaged 65 a week. The financial burn rate of salaries and increased rent at the new facility meant the entire savings would be depleted in June if Palm Sunday was a bust.

Re-enter David Travis. He and Jeff had become quite close over the past months. David disciplined Jeff in management and leadership. Jeff disciplined David in his Christian walk. For Jeff it was a heady time, learning from someone so successful in business. The new friendship was welcome by Jeff, having arrived in a new community knowing no one. Which made David's conversation even more painful.

"I don't think this is a wise decision," he told Jeff. "And I'm not alone." David expressed his concern that the plan was too ambitious and fiscally irresponsible. It jeopardized the entire ministry that the group had worked for over the past year. He would rather the group slowly grow. Maybe go to two services in the same location. He never threatened to stop giving, but the message was received that they might not continue once their pledge was completed.

When the skeleton gets hair and eyes...

A few months earlier Jeff had encountered conflict of another kind, in the area of music selection. While the group wanted to do a different kind of worship, the reality is that there is different and then there is different.

At that point Jeff visited Alex, a church planter in a suburb 30 miles away. This pastor had planted a congregation using the "hive off" method—the mother church had sent 200 people to get the site going. It was one of the fastest growing churches in the metro area.

Alex told Jeff that conflict in the pre-launch and post-launch stages was inevitable, no matter how much Jeff had communicated the vision. "It's like a skeleton," Alex said. "Before the worship really happens and the children's and youth ministries begin, when everything is in a conceptual 'on paper' stage, everyone loves it. But what most people don't realize is that they simply love the skeleton. And more than that, in their heads they are seeing it differently than the other person. He is picturing his daughter with blond hair and blue eyes, tall and thin. She is seeing her son, muscular build, curly hair, dark complexion. And no one sees it as clearly as you do.

"The point is that regardless of how often you share the vision, most of those in the launch are not living it like you are living it. They have day jobs. And because they do not—frankly, cannot—invest the hours you do, their picture of the future will be less defined and thus more open to them filling-in-the-blanks on their own.

"You, however, have filled in the blanks. You lay awake at night fretting over details and praying over volunteer positions. You have sketched and re-sketched the future. You know what you want to see happen, and that clarity helps you lead with greater confidence, but that clarity also fools you into thinking everyone sees it as clearly as you do. You see the entire house in your head, you hear the entire song in your ears. You try to describe it all or strum it out with your fingers, but to no avail. They don't see it all. They can't hear the tune as clearly as you. No way.

"So prepare yourself for losing some of your launch team. You can't keep them all. You don't want to keep them all."

Jeff left that meeting thankful for someone who had gone before him. He was not looking forward to the conflict ahead. He often wondered which of those he was close to in the launch team would ultimately leave in disappointment. The conversation had given him more confidence for moving forward, though.

And now, just weeks before launch one of the key donors was telling Jeff the launch was a mistake.

Jeff decided to call Wes.

Pig or chicken?

Jeff laid out his conversation with Alex. Wes, too, had heard the concerns. Frankly he had some himself. But in a true coach fashion he simply told Jeff a story.

“Have you ever heard the one about the pig and the chicken? A pig and a chicken are walking down a road. The chicken looks at the pig and says, “Hey, why don’t we open a restaurant?” The pig looks back at the chicken and says, “Good idea, what do you want to call it?” The chicken thinks about it and says, “Why don’t we call it ‘Ham and Eggs’?” “I don’t think so,” says the pig, “I’d be committed, but you’d only be involved.”

“Jeff,” said Wes, “I’m the chicken. I’ll donate money and time. And I really want to see this thing work. But you are the pig. At the end of the day if it does not work, you are the one who will pay the price. You will be out of a job. Your reputation is at stake. It is your bacon on the line. You are the one who has to make the call.”

The honesty of Wes’ words and the reality of the risk convicted Jeff. Not only was he risking his family’s well-being, but also that of two employees and the donations of 30 families. And he would probably lose what he thought was a good friend.

Questions for Clarity

1. What conflict was present in the launch team? Where did it stem from?
 2. List all of the values you find in the story.
 3. What should Jeff do?
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