



Leading Missional Change Case Study

REV 29 December 2015

BILL WOOLSEY

The Roller Coaster

Overview

Apex Community, a six-year old congregation, was located in Medina, Ohio, a southwest suburb of Cleveland. Throughout its brief history, the congregation had experienced three relocations and a severe economic depression, all the while challenging the status quo of its denomination. The ride had been exhausting on the membership and especially taken a toll on Thad Jackson, Apex's founding pastor. Thad is seriously considering resigning his call and changing careers.

"It's the Economy, Stupid!"

Thad hung up the phone. It was Lisa Adams; Jim her husband was on his way home. The police found him almost 40 miles away in Canton just sitting in his car wondering what he was going to do. Jim had worked for Ford Motor Company since high school and the recent auto and steel industry layoffs left him and thousands of others with no income for their families. No college degree, a depressed local economy, and a home worth only one-half of its mortgage led to suicidal thoughts that drove men like Jim to simply get in their cars and drive with no thought for where. At least driving was doing something.

Thad shared many of Jim's feelings. Even though the congregation was still able to pay his salary (albeit reduced), he understood being at the mercy of forces beyond his control. When Apex moved to Rochester elementary school in August 2006, five subdivisions were under construction. By the end of 2008, the neighborhoods resembled ghost towns. In Thad's new subdivision outside of Medina 140 of the 150 lots sat empty. So many people were leaving Cleveland and no one moving in that U-hauls cost double the norm because drivers had to be hired to bring them back. This created a culture of garage sales: when a family moved, it simply sold all of its belongings rather than pay the extra cost of taking them.

What affected the city affected the congregation. Since the fall of 2008 and the crash of the auto industry coupled with Continental Airlines leaving town after consolidating with United, Apex had lost one-third of its worshipers, shrinking from 250 on a Sunday to around 160. Gone were the dreams of hiring additional staff. No administrative assistant or children's ministry leader would be joining the team. And gone were many of Apex's leaders, having moved out of state seeking employment for their families. For the second time since 2004 Thad faced rebuilding leadership, and he doubted he was up for it.

Maybe he should just get in the car and drive.

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

Copyright 2015 FiveTwo Network. To order copies or request permission to reproduce materials, please email info@fivetwo.com. This publication may not be digitized, photocopied or otherwise reproduced, posted, or transmitted without the written permission of FiveTwo Network or Bill Woolsey.

Party Girl & Wonder Bread

Born in Cleveland and raised in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod Thad loved his state and his denomination. His family was active at historic Ebenezer Evangelical Lutheran, downtown Cleveland, where his mother served as a church secretary and worship revolved around the liturgy and hymnal. Ebenezer's involvement in community renovation formed his vision for Christianity apart from Sunday, a vision that would mold Thad's mission focus.

A near-death experience of an emergency appendectomy in 8th grade shaped him as well. The burst appendix led to a dire prognosis and moved his mother to discuss her faith very clearly, in the process securing his. From that day on Thad took his faith seriously and sensed God calling him to share Christ with others. That did not necessarily mean becoming a pastor, however. Rather Thad desired a 9-5 job close to home. After high school he attended University of Akron, entered law school and worked in the GAO's office.

It was at U of A that he met Sarah, his Party Girl. Known as "Mr. Wholesome, like Wonder Bread," Thad's attraction to Sarah caught many by surprise—especially when they married in June of 1991, only six months after he graduated from Akron. No one was more surprised than Sarah, however, when soon after their wedding day Thad shared a new calling: attend seminary and become a pastor. Sarah the Party Girl was also the Faith Girl. She trusted Thad's calling and to seminary they moved.

During seminary Thad's evangelistic heart led them to a two-year internship on the mission field in Vietnam where the first of two daughters was born. That experience served as another training ground where they saw God's Spirit work miraculous things in their midst. Upon completion they returned to the United States, completed seminary and then served a ten-year old church in Denver. Thad was the associate pastor of adult ministry. He remained there three years.

Returning Home

In 1999, Thad received a call to be associate pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran in Moreland Hills, a suburb of Cleveland. Gloria Dei was a vibrant church with a senior pastor, Jerry, who led a very outreach oriented ministry. His son, Brad, was also on staff and was seen as the possible successor to Jerry. Initially he and Thad got along but after a few years their ministry philosophies diverged, resulting in conflict.

Thad's main responsibilities addressed adult education. Over the five years he was at Gloria Dei, Thad built an extensive small group ministry. He also supervised the other adult ministry staff, aligning and focusing them on the mission plan. His goal was to create a more outreach-focused environment conducive to inviting and including lost people in the life of the church.

A number of years after arriving at Gloria Dei, Thad began to sense a desire to start a church. He wanted to create a place for 20-30 year olds who were disconnected from church, with no church home. In 2004, the Ohio District had plans to plant a church in Cuyahoga Falls, near Medina. The English District, a non-geographical district of the LCMS, had staked out Twinsburg, a suburb 12 miles to the southeast of Cleveland and 12 miles to the north of the Ohio District's proposed site.

Initially Jerry and the leaders of Gloria Dei were supportive of Thad planting the church. As Thad felt more and more called to go plant, he began introducing elements like drama, videos,

and even mainstream songs from U2 into Gloria Dei's worship. He envisioned his new church having these ingredients and wanted to give Gloria Dei a taste of those.

In reality, this only heightened the conflict between Thad and Brad. Brad had moved to a more liturgical, traditional approach to worship. And the occasional whispers that Thad would be a better senior pastor, and thus successor, than Brad created tension between all of the staff.

Gloria Dei's leadership also began to realize that many members of Gloria Dei might follow Thad to the new site. Thad was young, charismatic and a good preacher. They were not sure Gloria Dei could sustain 100-200 members leaving. Thus, Jerry and the leadership began to pull back support and actually moved to stop the plant.

In October 2004, Thad called a church planter mentor in Houston asking advice on which plant to pursue: the Ohio District one or the English District one. His friend told him, "If the District President is not 100% behind you, do not go there. The DP has to have your back because you will get a lot of challenges later, challenges you will need someone else to fight for you." Thad then sat down with the District President of Ohio. President Helm's response was: "We want to see new congregations, but we do not want to make lots of waves with existing ones." President Knight, president of the English District, shared, "One of my kids is very active in his church. One is divorced and struggles with going. Another rarely attends and sees the local church as irrelevant to life. We need to do whatever it takes to reach this generation of people. Whatever. I don't care. We just need to reach them. My motto is: 'The Faith of the Fathers in the language of the children.' This is my last term. I don't care who gets mad." Thad took the call to the English District in December 2004.

A Whirlwind Six Months

Thad and Sarah started with a handful of people—fifteen—in their basement that January. None of them had ever led in ministry. Only a few had been involved in a ministry. Some were from a nearby congregation; some were unchurched friends. Amy, a musician who worked in a local bar, wanted to help lead music. Her opening comments typified the group: "I'm used to singing in bars; I never sang in church before. I don't know what I'm doing." As a group, they were young, idealistic, and naive.

To come up with a name, Thad passed out sheets of paper with the phrase, "Hello, I'd like to invite you to _____." Each person was to enter the name they think would best connect with the 20-30 year olds they were seeking. Michael suggested Apex: "Worship should be the high point and changing point of the week." Someone also pointed out how the peak of a Christian's life was the crucifixion—just as Jesus died for us, we are called to die to ourselves." Apex it was.

In February, their little crowd had grown to 25. A larger local church heard of them and of Thad. Martin Jacks, the associate who served as the vacancy senior pastor at St. Timothy's, wanted ministry to happen and was willing to take the bullets for it. He invited Thad and Apex to come onsite and use St. Timothy's gym for free. St. Timothy's was located less than five miles south of where the plant was eventually to be, so the location made sense. However Thad pointed out that Apex was not intending to launch until the fall. It had no money, no equipment, and very little plan. Martin was persistent. Thad saw this as an opportunity. He told Martin that

if St. Timothy's would provide the sound equipment and means to conduct worship, Apex would train St. Timothy's people. St. Timothy's said yes. Apex took the offer.

The excitement of having a home was immediately replaced with the reality of not having the infrastructure to keep up the home nor the maturity to offset the differing values of the new guests. As soon as Apex began worship in April at St. Timothy's, it grew almost ten-fold: from 25 to over 200 a Sunday. No teams had been developed; no values had been incorporated. St. Timothy's advertised Apex as an alternative for their worshiping body. Which meant that on any given Sunday over one-half of the worshipers were from St. Timothy's, a congregation with different values than Thad intended to instill. With Thad and the group moving immediately into weekly worship, the majority of their time focused there: they ignored spending adequate time discussing and fine-tuning the Biblical values and foundation for their new church.

What could not be ignored was the response to the initial Apex sermon series. The series was "Join the Rebellion!" Based on the Book of Acts it presented how the apostles were the "bad" guys rebelling against the "good" guys of the institutional church. The look coincided with the national release of *Star Wars, Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*. Sunday morning's publicity featured a member dressed in a Chewbacca costume, holding a placard by the main road encouraging passers-by to come in. Apex sent out a press release on the Thursday before opening Sunday. By Friday, Thad had calls from newspapers and television. He was interviewed by MSNBC (the segment was not aired after the connection to Jesus Christ was clarified), NPR, and a radio show out of Houston. Fox8 Cleveland showed up at Thad's home and Apex's opening Sunday was featured on the evening news in Cleveland. In all it was very heady stuff—even their website crashing daily with the 1000's of national hits it was receiving. Thad and the congregation felt they had made a great beginning splash. President Knight was very, very supportive.

At the end of the three-week series, they wrapped by inviting the congregation to watch *Episode III* together at a local theatre. Almost 250 people showed up. What did not show up, however, were the information cards. The volunteer in charge forgot them. Thad blew a gasket. They lost the opportunity to follow up on the people who joined them.

The movie miss was representative of the foundational misses present in Apex. They had no systems in place to absorb new people and no way of telling who was from Trinity and who from the outside—the very people they were trying to reach. There were no processes for incorporating the guests into an active role. St. Timothy's mature values were mingling with Apex's immature values, often trumping them. In the end, the move to St. Timothy's most benefited St. Timothy's.

June found attendance back down to 125. It was also the month Thad and his family moved, from one neighborhood to another. This family stressor combined with the up and down of the past few months was enough to send Thad into a major depression. Apex's inability to retain the growth they saw in April and May hit him and the leaders hard. Many of them had anticipated 1000's of people. Instead they had small groups of seekers with no leaders equipped to lead them.

The reality of summer resulted in conflict on the leadership team of nine people. All were volunteers, all with loosely defined yet extremely necessary roles. The Star Wars push led to the team not meeting as much, neglecting relationships and decision processing. In addition Thad did not enjoy confronting and failed to follow up on conflictual issues present in the team. Many of those issues involved money.

As June became July Thad was more convinced to move forward with the “hard” launch in September, moving Apex from St. Timothy’s campus to a local movie theater. This would give Apex its own identity. Trailer, equipment, and launch publicity would cost approximately \$100k, \$50k of which they would have to borrow. Thad was convinced of the necessity to borrow. The rest of his leadership team was not. They were not even convinced of the necessity of moving out of St. Timothy’s

Alan Cartwright, the “treasurer” of the leadership team, stated it this way: “It’s free rent. Why move? I was on the board of a non-profit and it went belly up. Since I was an officer, I had to pay back part of the debt. I don’t want that to happen to me again.” Alan was responsible for securing the financing for the launch needs. He unilaterally decided not to pursue them.

In early August, Thad pulled his leadership team together. He talked about teamwork and the need to unite together as one. He showed a video clip from “Miracle on Ice.” He brought out a picture of the jerseys. “We need to take our names off the back of the jerseys and put Jesus’ name on there!” The result was limited. The three leaders who were worried about borrowing money felt Thad was forcing them into a situation they could not agree with. Following the meeting, they began promoting their case to the rest of the team. In the meantime, Thad found a private donor for borrowing the money. He had his green light. The question was how many would go with him.

In mid-August, the three leaders requested a meeting with Thad. They expressed how they felt the ministry had all gone to Thad’s head, that he was too egotistical. They wanted to take the issue to the congregation. One of the leaders was a close friend and confidant of Thad’s. Their families had vacationed together. His desire to stay at Trinity rather than take the risk shook Thad deeply.

Following the meeting Thad called Dave Friedrichs, the district mission executive. Dave’s counsel was to the point: “This is a scary time. If you’re going to plant a church, sooner or later you have to launch. Your leaders need to decide if they want to sign on for another year or not. Ask everyone on your leadership team and then also on the next ring out and see if they want to re-up or go elsewhere.” Thad had two meetings at his house—20 people each. He explained the vision and desire of where he wanted to take them. Five of the original key families decided to not continue. It was the most difficult thing Thad had ever been through. To watch those close friends walk away hurt more than he anticipated.

From A Theater to A School

In September 2005 Apex launched at the local movie theater. It had four leaders and a little over 50 people. It conducted a mailing campaign and welcomed 130 people in the first service, growing to almost 200 over the course of the next year. The location was perfect—off of a freeway, central to a large part of the region. People twenty miles away could easily access it.

In August 2006 the theater gave Apex a two-week notice it had to vacate the theater. Locations were not easy to come by, and Apex ended up at a school eight miles away, not near a freeway and “buried” in a community. The move took a toll on attendance: Only 100 people made the move.

The Sex Church

While the move was hard, it resulted in new people and new opportunities. Once again Thad asked the question of his leadership, “With so many people around us who have no clue

about God, what could we do to reach them?" In January 2007 it was decided: do a message series on sex.

Thad and his team built the series off of a series from a large church in Indiana. It was titled, "Pure Sex." They bought a promo video to run on their website, incorporating statements such as, "Sex wasn't invented in a dark alley--it was God's design." "Where do you go to get rid of your shame from sex?" "God designed sex. He created it. He can release you from your past sexual mistakes." Apex also conducted a mailing campaign. The card pictured the end of a bed with four feet hanging out. They decided to put a bed up on stage as well for worship.

The day after the mailing hit, a number of people called from the community expressing their dislike. Then déjà vu Star Wars: Fox8 Cleveland called. So did the newspapers and television. Thad was interviewed on Buzzard Radio's Rover's Morning Glory drive-time show in Cleveland. The interview turned into a 15-minute discussion on all things sex. One of the deejays, a woman, asked him, "If you know that God answers your prayers, do you think it would be ok if God gave me a man with an extremely large...?" And the website crashed because it got too many hits.

This time the public response was more mixed. A number of people attended worship, thankful for the topic and the church's willingness to address it. But the majority of the LCMS pastors in the area were livid. They were embarrassed by the news footage, embarrassed by the radio interview. The first Sunday of the series a retired pastor showed up and, took pictures for a conservative Christian newspaper. He told Thad after the service that it was sacrilegious that a bed was up front, that Thad should leave LCMS. Pastors called saying the picture of the bed on the mailer was erotic and should be removed from the website

The national president of the denomination had a representative call and request the congregation remove the video from the site, especially since it linked back to national headquarters. The English District President had changed. The new district president, only in office two months, called Thad after the first week and suggested they not use the word sex. "Perhaps use the word intimacy?" He also mentioned how a number of the local pastors were upset with how Thad's service did not always have a creed or Lord's Prayer. His style was more conciliatory than his predecessor and suggested that Thad and the local pastors should probably meet.

Thad called his leadership team together. "What should we do?" Rather than split them, the conflict unified them, allowing them to rally around the values and vision that led to the series. They decided to remove the web video for the national president's sake (it had already been up on the site for two weeks). But that was the only change they made. They reaffirmed their calling to reach lost people and their commitment to do that even if it caused offense in the Church. If fellow Christians wanted to come and argue with them or tape them and transcribe them, that was fine. Apex decided no matter who attended and spied on them, they would love them. "We are here to reach the lost and sometimes in reaching them, we'll offend the saved."

Thad communicated their decision back to the district president, reinforcing how the card was no more erotic than the latest mail issue of Victoria's Secret catalogue. The district president listened and reiterated his preference. Following that meeting, he called to tell Thad he needed to attend two 3-hour meetings of the regional English District pastors. The meetings would focus on reconciliation. Fifteen other pastors were present: 10 very upset, five somewhat, and one who supported Thad. Overall the meetings consisted of Thad being told how wrong he was and how Sunday was not a time to teach what he was teaching. In a later

discussion with one of the conservative, more liturgical pastors, after the phone call had continued longer than necessary, Thad told him how many people struggled with pornography. He then asked him, "How's your pornography problem going?" The fellow pastor hung up.

In the months ahead, Thad would be known as the Sex Pastor and Apex as "the church that did that sex series." In June, Rover's Morning Glory replayed the radio interview, reopening the wound among the clergy. One-half of the people who came for the series remained after it was over, and Apex entered the fall of 2008 with 250 in worship.

So Now What?

The economic bust of 2008 – 2009 took a serious toll on Apex and Thad. The congregation dropped from 250 to 160 in worship, reliving its past. And as went Apex, so went Thad. At the end of 2009 he was completely exhausted having experienced a prolonged case of shingles and spent over six months in counseling. It was a year of deep questioning, especially deep questioning of his faith. On one hand he considered putting his name on a call list for other congregations to consider; on the other hand, he considered leaving the ministry all together. He did not want to uproot his girls during their high school years but perhaps he could become a counselor at a local center? Either way he was not sure he could remain as a pastor of Apex. The emotional cost was too much.
