

When Jesus Is All You Have

A Church without a Plan—and Only a Prayer

By Gordon Meier

“You know that Bible you got for me?” a man said to me recently. “I read it already. Do you have another one?” He thought maybe there was a sequel.

“There is just one Bible, George,” I said, “but what you need to do is read it again and again.” The spiritual hunger that George and scores of others have expressed is something I had never personally experienced until planting a church nearly three years ago.

My family history is filled with a long line of missionaries and pastors. I spent ten years in the pastorate before serving as church-planting director and later as a district superintendent in my denomination. And what happened in my last year as superintendent profoundly changed me.

Lost Health with Spiritual Surgery

After many years of back problems, I had to have surgery because I was no longer able to walk. During the operation, I contracted a serious hospital-borne infection—one of the super bugs. Eighty percent of those who contract this infection don't leave the hospital alive, but I went home without

knowing I had it. My incision burst open, and the doctors did a second surgery to clean out the wound. They nicked the dura (the sheath covering the spinal cord), and the infection raged through my body.

After receiving massive doses of antibiotics, I was sent home. I spent several months in a bed in our family room, on IVs around the clock. I was extremely weak, had blurred vision and migraine headaches, and was in a lot of pain. Physicians told me that I would be unable to preach again. I was told to prepare for disability. In many ways, this was my dark night of the soul. But God did deep spiritual surgery.

My life had been defined by title and position—where I was serving and the success I was experiencing. But when I lost my health, suddenly title and position meant absolutely nothing. God peeled back the layers of my life like an onion. All I had was Jesus—and He became more precious to me than ever. Though I would never want to go through that experience again, I wouldn't trade it for the world.

When I finally returned to the office part time and in a weakened condition, I was coming to the end of my tenure as superintendent and wondered what God had for me. Jonathan Schaeffer, pastor of Grace Church in Cleveland, OH, told me that his congregation was ready to plant a church about ten miles south of their location. As soon as he said that, something tugged my heart. I thought, I would love to do that.

"Honey," I asked my wife Barb, "what do you think about planting a church in Brunswick?" At that time I still experienced physical difficulties from the infection.

"Well, that would be cool," she said, "but are you sure you can do it?"

"I sense this is what God wants me to do," I answered.

Born Out of a Prayer Meeting

After my experience with Jesus and His Word during the worst part of my illness, I had a tremendous vision to be involved in something that could only be explained by God Himself. Up to that time, most of my success could be attributed to my education, experience, and gifts. I managed to do it well. God graciously allowed me to enjoy good ministry in a variety of settings for 30 years.

But years earlier, I heard the late Armin Gesswein explain that the early Church was born out of a prayer meeting. He reminded us that after Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples immediately went back to the upper room and waited on God—waited and worshiped as they prayed and sought the Lord (Acts 1:14). After ten days, the Holy Spirit fell on them at Pentecost. Three thousand people believed and were baptized in one day; within a few days there were 5,000 new followers. People were being healed, transformed, and changed by God's power. That's what I wanted to experience.

Over the years, I had collected more than a few books on church planting and church growth. I had shelves devoted to the mechanics of long-range planning and strategies to implement. I had DVDs and tape series, and I had been certified in everything related to "how to do it." But when I left the district office, all my books were packed in storage—except one. I had the profound awareness that all I needed was Jesus and His Word.

And so when we moved to Brunswick, I knew no one in the community. But I was convinced that prayer was the answer. We told a few people that we were starting a prayer meeting in our living room. Barb and I didn't know how many people would come, but that first night ten people joined us. Those prayer meetings have never ended—only grown consistently.

Hope Church held its first service in the large auditorium at the high school performing arts center. God gave us our church name because our burden was to bring hope to the 36,000 residents in the community and 50,000 unchurched people in a five-mile radius. He wanted us to bring them this simple message: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 15:13).

God's Surprise Provision

Our goal has not been to plant a church but to reach a city. And there is a big difference. If we only wanted to plant a church, we could pat ourselves on the back and say, "We did it." But we are far from done because of the many people who are still lost.

Six months after our first service, God miraculously provided us with a building—the bingo hall of a Ukrainian Orthodox Church. After the priest died, his wife (Orthodox priests are allowed to marry) tried to carry on, but when the economy crashed, the church's primary source of income (bingo) also declined. The entire property, including the onion-domed church, went into foreclosure.

During this time, Hope Church was still in the "prayer meeting in the living room" phase. We hadn't taken our first offering. We didn't have elders. We didn't have a board. But I looked at that 13,200-square-foot brick bingo hall and knew that God wanted me to pursue it. I went to our prayer meeting group and said, "Would you pray? I have no idea what God has in mind."

Earlier, I had communicated clearly that "the church is people. We're not going to have a building at Hope Church. If we have to move multiple times, that's what we're going to do. We are not going to get strapped with a building."

Well, we prayed—and we ended up purchasing that building, which was listed in foreclosure at \$1.3 million, for \$800,000. After we purchased the bingo hall, we gutted it. The Lord miraculously provided \$250,000 to help us get the building ready. We never had a campaign or pledge cards. We didn't have a thermometer on the wall showing our giving. We never begged people for money. Every week at prayer meeting, we simply prayed.

Six months after our first service in the high school auditorium, we moved into our new building and held two services. Six months later we started Hope at Five, a Saturday night service that coincided with evening Mass, since our community is 50 percent Catholic. In that first Saturday night service, a family walked in that didn't know Christ. The next week they found the Lord and have been in church every week since.

Who Are They Talking To?

The prayer meeting has been the centerpiece of our ministry. New believers have never heard that they are not supposed to like prayer meetings or that such services are for seasoned Christians. So we tell every new believer to come on Wednesday night, because that's when we really meet with God.

A woman who had never been to a Protestant church or a prayer meeting visited one night. When we broke into small groups, the two ladies in her prayer triplet asked her how they could pray for her.

"Who are they talking to?" she asked, looking around at the other groups.

"God," they answered. "God is here. God listens when we pray; God answers."

"I don't know God," the woman said. "Could someone explain the Bible to me? I bought one, but it might as well be in Russian or Chinese. I don't understand it."

My wife Barb went to her home the next day and shared the gospel. The woman came to faith in Christ and is now being disciplined.

No Plan Beyond Asking the Lord

Nearly 200 people have come to faith in Christ since Hope Church started, and most are being disciplined. On Easter Sunday 2012, we had almost 1,200 people in four services. God has continued to do amazing things, including physical healings, financial provisions, and spiritual deliverance.

These things have not happened because I'm strong; I'm weak. It's because the Lord is on the move in our community. We have no specific goals. We have no contemporary strategies. We have no long-range plans. We just pray that the Lord of the harvest will stretch forth His hand and bring hungry people to Himself. And every week, people drive past the building, stop, come in, and find Jesus. People visit our prayer meeting regularly, and we have many new families every Sunday.

When God says that He wants us to ask, He means it. After 30 years of ministry and participating in multiple prayer summits, I've never seen God miraculously answer prayer like He has in the past three years. To see the Lord at work has been a tremendous blessing.

We don't have a lot of fancy programs at Hope Church, and we don't have it all together. We're just simple people who trust God, believing that "if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven" (Matt. 18:19). This has been the most exhilarating, stretching, humbling experience I've ever had.

GORDON MEIER is the senior pastor of Hope Church, Brunswick, OH, a church plant launched in 2009. He has also served in denominational leadership with the Christian & Missionary Alliance.

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