

THE CHURCH PLANTING PODCAST

with Greg Nettle



Greg Nettle:

Hey everyone. Welcome to The Church Planting Podcast. I'm Greg Nettle, and I have the privilege of serving as President of Stadia Church Planting. Our desire is to help you start thriving, growing, multiplying churches for the next generation. On today's episode of The Church Planting Podcast, we have a friend - gosh, we'd been friends for at least two decades. My friend Alan Hirsch Alan is the author of multiple books. I've read every single one of them and several of them two or three times. My favorite is The Forgotten Ways. Would you welcome Alan Hirsch? Alan, welcome to The Church Planting Podcast.

Alan Hirsch:

Greg, it's awesome - a joy to be with you again, mate. I do miss you very much.

Greg:

Yeah. You're over in Australia now and you're camping out there for this season in your life, but I'll - and I remember it's been over 20 years ago - when I read, I believe it was The Forgotten Ways and said, boy, I would love to meet this man to learn from Alan and you so graciously came to Ohio, met with me and met with a group of our church planters. And it was a transformative experience for us. Are you still doing much of that?

Alan:

Yes. Well, of course, you know, in this last two years more kind of online than before, but yeah, I'm still deeply committed to The Forgotten Ways and the topology there. In fact, the organization I currently lead is a thing called Movement Leaders Collective, which is built around the framework around the forgotten ways, or the six elements of DNA. So now very committed, I feel that very much my custodianship or what God has given me to steward into the world and to make sure it's understood. So yeah, it's going to define my life.

Greg:

You've been highly impactful in my life. And so vicariously then through, you know, through Stadia as a church planting organization, but you've been at this, we've been at this, a couple of decades and longer. What are some, some of your

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observations, kind of on that journey? As we talk to church planters and church leaders, what are a couple of things you'd say, you know what, these are headed in the right direction?

Alan:

Yeah. You know, the interesting thing is, Greg, is at work - and this is a reflection on global. You know, it was more my focus at the moment, just looking at European, some African, Asian, and then of course, North American context. I think what the last few years have taught us is, under COVID conditions particularly, began to become aware of the flaws in the way we understand the church. I mean, mostly church planters particularly have tended to do what I now call worship service planting. It's not church planting per se. I mean, cause the focus in most people's mind is either planting or pulpit. If you come from all the reform camp, it's about getting a pulpit in there and that's really what it's about, you know, or if you coming more from the charismatic thing, it's about getting a worship service going, but they don't think of church beyond a single Sunday experience.

Sunday is part of it but it's only a small part. And what I think I would say is that people interested in multiplication need to - I think one of the things that we've not seen enough of, but now under the last few years have begun to take place, is that the paradigm, the operating system it was prior to this existing time, those legitimizing that behavior has now come into question because we began to see the flaws in it, being so reliant on the Sunday expression. And I think we're beginning to see that actually you need to change the paradigm in order to really change our practices.

Greg:

Okay. So I got to stop you there because that's what you said already. So we have a tendency to plant a pulpit where preaching becomes central. Or we plan a worship service where worship becomes central. So let's dive in a little bit deeper as we're listening as church planters. What do we really need to be looking at when you talk about the church as a bigger paradigm? What's it sound like?

Alan:

Yeah. You know, I think the question is, does the church have expression beyond its Sunday gathering, which has become, I could say, our obsession is really focused on that. Does what's going on beyond Sunday, which I think is such an

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obvious thing to say? I mean, it's really much more a network of people engaged in all of them. How do we support that? Let me give you a metaphor. It's actually, it's a story. It's cause I think it'll make this point. If you want to learn how to play the game of chess, I suggest that you take your queen out first. Now what'll happen? Your opponent keeps the queen, right? They're going to cream you for a long time, but what's going to happen under those conditions. If you stick in there, what you'll learn is what the other chess pieces do. And then you put your queen back in. If you can win without your queen, then you put your queen back in, you know how to play chess now, because what has happened is you've learned the other dimensions of chess.

What most people do is over rely on the queen. And by doing that, they forget what the other pieces can do. And you can win with a pawn, if you know what to do with it. And so I think that that's a useful metaphor, I think, to help us think of. What are the other dimensions that we missing on?

If you, if God, for some reason closed down your Sunday, how would you be the church? How would you be faithful to the calling and the great commission that you've been called to? That's the question. And I think we need to think beyond the obsession and our kind of narrowing down of the church to kind of the experience.

Greg:

Alan, I think you were the first person who raised the idea of community service to me, and then this idea of community on mission together and the aspect of church with that. Can you unpack that a little bit as it fits into this, this parallel?

Alan: Yeah. We'll say community to us is the form of community that gathers in the context of a challenge, an ordeal, in danger. It's you going up the mountain with a group of friends, right? You experience a comradeship on the slope of a mountain that you could never do in a Bible study, you know, there's something going on there that when you're relying on each other at a deeper level, you know, that brings you together and it creates something very primal in terms of our relationship now in relationship to this. What precipitates community ties is what we call liminality. Liminality is the conditions of risk, danger, challenge, even being humbled, being cast down in a sense until you're willing to learn. So what happens in those conditions? In liminal conditions, we are willing to learn new things.

An example of this is you taking the family out for a picnic in the woods. You're walking through the woods, it's a beautiful day. And you're frolicking through the

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forest and then you realize, darn, after two, three hours, you're completely lost. Now, all of a sudden, one of the beautiful kind of birds overhead and all the beautiful kind of things you're seeing are now a threat to your life. And through your family, what's going to happen is going to focus you big time about how do I survive? How do I get out of here? And what it'll do is it'll bring you together because simply you have to. And I think that what church planters particularly need to recover is that.

Is it a sense of risk and challenge that calls them to discover sources in themselves – innovative, entrepreneurial resources, because under those conditions, in that forest, you're going to have to learn about, how do you create a little kind of place for your family to live in? You know, how'd you get some food and what can you eat? You're going to have to learn a whole new set of skills. I think that we can learn so much from this. We are so risk averse and we also rely on overly developed models that are really, I think, somewhat defunct or are now shown to be, you know, obsolete, and I think we're gonna have to learn new things. And I think liminality is great conditions to do some new learning.

Greg:

Okay, so talk about what, what models do you think are out of date? Now, give us just a picture of a couple that you think these might be just, uh, not doing so good now.

Alan: So at the paradigm level, I think we've largely in the Western world operated using what we call it - Christian demanded staying the church. Now Christendom came about when Constantine blended the church. Well, this was a bit of a process, but started with Constantine and basically the church entered into this embrace. So you can see this in European history, this state embrace. Now what that meant is that the church became the only official religion of the empire under those conditions. Everyone was a Christian. I mean, if you were born in Europe in 1200, you were Christian, although you were Jewish, but you suffered from that or you were gypsy, but the marginal pagans were pushed aside and most people were baptized as children into the faith.

The way we thought about church then is that the church is not a missionary agency. That churches are kind of more a support agency for what everyone was - a Christian. You didn't have to do any mission. You didn't have to particularly do evangelism. If people wanted to find God they'd come to the church, there was no alternative.

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The problem is that that's changed on us. In America we still operate under a Christendom mentality. Mental maps were formed in the European experience. We assume that everyone's a Christian and that you can come to us on our terms. Now this is now you want to go back to Europe.

Now you want to see the future of the European derivative. I suggest go back to Europe, go and see what's happening there. You'll see it's a bloody disaster, to be honest with you. We're probably seeing in some context of European vestiges of biblical Christianity in that continent. And then something happens, you know, because that is an obsolete model because now they're living in a missionary environment where everyone is fighting and they're not going to choose the church because there's all that history. I think America is only beginning to wake up to this because we've assumed that everyone's American, everyone's Christian. You can see this even more recently in many of the ideological debates, the assumption that the church is the moral defender of society and all it's nonsense.

We've caught a standard for holiness and do that kind of stuff in the name of Jesus, but we're not responsible for everyone's behaviors and we're not going to legislate on that stuff. I think it's a false understanding. It comes from Christendom controlling paradigm, but we're no longer there. We're missionaries now. And we always have been actually.

Greg:

I'm loving this. I sit and listen and sit with you for hours. I've always loved to learn from you. So one of the things Alan that I'm watching in church planting world is - and I couldn't agree more with you in the United States with what's going on - and yet I'm watching in our church plants in Asia, for instance, where it's very difficult to be a Christian, if not, life-threatening to be a Christian and the church has actually flourishing there, I'm seeing, you know, the greatest multiplication I'm watching right now are in those countries. So could you speak to that a little bit and about that liminality and how that model is working and how can we learn from that?

Alan:

That's exactly right. And as you know, much of my thinking is shaped by trying to understand what was going on, say for instance, in the church in China and the conditions of severe, horrible, evil persecution that killed it just awful. It was absolutely awful. But under those conditions, the church rediscovers latent potentials which must've been there already, and then that have been latent for

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centuries - millennia, even - comes to the fore. Now what has happened is that all the things we rely on were removed, you know. Under the Chinese church – they've had the church for 2000 years actually - it had been there for a long time because apparently possibly Thomas came to the East and established churches, and they were there. It hadn't flourished it very much, but they were there now under the conditions, all the seminaries, taken out, buildings removed, leaders killed or imprisoned. Now you've got an educated parents who somehow discover something that must've really been there and is exposing lawfully.

You know, it looks awfully like the early church. And again, what COVID taught us is, and I don't know whether we've learned it - I think we want to go back to normal, you know, the chances of discovery of something much more lightened, much more powerful to multiply.

You have to simplify. It's one of the things you also have to build on discipleship, but to multiply something, most of our ways we think about church are not easily multipliable. They need \$2 million budgets and then need 200 people before you're willing to call it. Worship and smoke machines, that is not the multipliable form.

What is under the conditions? What you're seeing in Asia is they are the multiplier will form smaller, closer to the priesthood of all believers that that average dedicated disciple of Jesus can reproduce the whole. And then you've got movements. You see, because once you've got that - when everyone is, is a potential church in everyone, so you know, that the vector Jerusalem movement is that church movement in China. It's a martyrdom movement back to Jerusalem. They got to go through the Arab lands, right. And Islam they're willing to die, you know, to get the gospel back to Jerusalem. So, they're ninjas these guys, right?

And they said that have the phrase, every believer is a church planter. Every church is a church planting church. I think once you can get there, when we can see every believer has the potential of ecclesia in them, they're like a seed in potential, the trees, potential forest, all contained in the small spot. Then you're thinking movement really simplify to multiply. And I think that we have not fully learned yet. It's still very professional. We don't disciple people. So that, that can't carry the code terribly well. They become attenders and the consumers of our religious goods and services. And Jesus can't do terribly much with 1200 consumers. You can do something with 12 disciples. I think we need to learn there too. There's a few tricks there too.

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Greg: This is amazing. You know, one of the things that I am watching Alan, in the United States and I'm watching it primarily with our brothers and sisters of color who are planting churches is they are tending to be bi-vocational church planters. We just launched a church up in Cleveland, Ohio this past weekend. And when I say launched, she's been leading this church for quite some time, but it was kind of their official launch. But what I'm watching, you know, she's bi-vocational, when we talk about the \$2 million budget for a church launch and we may still need those, I'm not going down that path right now, but her budget is much, much lower. And, my wife and I went up to their three o'clock Sunday afternoon gathering. And at the end of the gathering, she brought this gentleman over and said, this is the first church planter coming out of our church. He's ready to go and multiply. So it's, it's that simplicity, if you will - they don't need that huge budget necessarily.

Let's disciple for movement. So let's get just real pragmatic. If I'm a church planter out there and I'm going, man, I just love the sound of this. And getting back to the forgotten ways, if you will, what are, what are a couple of pragmatic steps you would say to a church planter who's called by God, but hasn't launched yet or figured out their model yet?

Alan:

Well, I think I would say something about figuring out - I would point people in a direction of thinking in terms of movement and not planting a church. The problem is for us, Greg, is that when we think, when we say that we're church darned, if it doesn't always look the same, you know - he's always got a bloody steeple on it. It always got. Which again, whenever your stickies. Right? But we're never commanded to plant churches. Right? There's two ways of thinking differently about that is to don't plant churches, plant the gospel. Plant the gospel, and then Jesus builds a church, which is much closer to the biblical.

So, and when you talk about gospel planting, it's much more prior to the church itself. One of the principles of missionary approaches to things with the missional movement is that missiology or mission precedes ecclesiology, that is, we do mission and the church comes out of our missionary endeavor.

Greg:

It's one of the first things. Christology proceeds missiology proceeds ecclesiology. And if we get those out of order, everything's messed up.

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Alan:

Yeah. And then that you need to constantly go back to Jesus, which I think right now is our big issue is making sure that we act, look, think like Jesus, which right now is dicey when we're not. I think this is the ultimate measure of a church to be, look, think like Jesus.

So do mission and you go to a missionary environment, you don't know the answers of these two questions before you get there. What is gospel for those people group? What's going to sound like good news for them? Don't presume you know. Ask questions, find out what the issues that they're dealing with. You know, what's the existential religious question? Observe, make, and then you bring the gospel to bear or a dimension of biblical gospel today. So that's one thing then what is church for this people group - you don't know till you get there. And so you've got to look at where people gather, why they gather, you know, and begin to try and engage where they're engaging.

And I think that's just good missionary practice. The other thing, so planting the gospel is getting beyond our kind of impacts at the moment, but the other one would be the gospel plant movements begin with the end in mind. If you want a movement on the other side, you want something scalable, something impactful, start with it, but stay with it.

So plenty of movements don't plant a church and plan something. That's going to be static, you know, which is a classic. Plants aesthetic has never reproduced itself, built something that's scalable from the beginning. So scalability is designed into the process, both in terms of discipleship, but also modification. And I would think it very key if I was church planting, again, I think very carefully about the basic paradigm in the model, which goes back to the movement, thinking we started with think movement, act movement. I think this is the key to us breaking out of this stuff. Still impart impacts that we find ourselves.

Greg:

Okay, let me, let me shift gears now to some more thought of that you and I have talked about of where you are currently with the church. So this idea of does the church reflect Jesus and there's certainly some ugliness going on right now with, um, do we adhere to the left? Do we adhere to the right? It's all politicized and so forth. Talk a little bit about that in the context of church planting and how damaging that is in the culture that we're trying to reach.

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Alan:

Yeah. So, the trick here is to think about this as visceral as it is an issue in America at the moment. And we said, it's not just America, but it's primarily, then it's infecting the rest of the world. Definitely here in Australia, too. You know, it comes from the somewhat divisive kind of experience of having Trump in the world. It's not a political statement. It's just the most divisive man. And what is caused is this kind of split in the way people think now. What's actually happened is we've attached ourselves to certain ideologies.

Now, the thing about an ideology is that it grabs a certain idea, calls for your passionate involvement. So it calls for your life. It calls for your conversion to give yourself over to something. The problem is, we're not called to be those people. That what I think we fundamentally called to be is the people that I've used this phrase really, but to that resemble or look and sound and think like Jesus.

We're called to be a people that corresponds to our founder. We meant to be the body of Christ and Christ looks like this. The church has meant to look like that too, and that it's not getting. You just read the gospels to know what Jesus thinks. Like, you know, you got enough there to kind of, to go with, right? What does Jesus think about money? Whoa, whoa. That's different to the way the world thinks about money and you have to take that seriously because Jesus matters to the church. So I think this recalibration, what I call the Be Jesus thing, the Jesus thing of the church is the church attaches to Jesus.

It tends to fade out and just, you got to have this constant renewal just coming back to Jesus, realigning, going out, and missional church realigning. And I think it's regular. And I think that that's what's needed in our time - is that not political ideologies, that call for your life and make you angry and pick up weapons if you could to kill. Which is really what, you know, thankfully that hasn't happened, but it could, and I think Christians are caught up in this. This is horrifying, you know that we can be that kind of people. Cause we'd violate our most fundamental obligations to reflect and embody who Jesus is and what he stands for in the world. You know, we're violating our calling at a very deep level when you go the political path, either left or right.

Greg:

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So where do we come out? Prophetically. Alan, how does that play out in that, in what you're talking about? What's our prophetic voice in the world? I mean, is it really to be this people?

When we talk about Jesus, he had this incredible ability to balance love and truth, right. Grace and truth. And that seems very difficult in the United States these days. It's like we're airing on one side or the other.

Alan:

Yeah, no, I agree. So that I think it is, it's a challenge, but it always was, and it might get you killed, but then Jesus didn't promise us anything different, you know, it's what he said. You're going to have trouble, you know? I think when you're standing for something. What I think is that to be Christ-like in the world and to call the world to Christ-likeness. And just by the way, I'll say this - actually my book *ReJesus*, which you know, is around as Michael [Frost] and myself have redone it. And so this is kind of now put together in a new edition. We all kind of updated stuff around *ReJesus*. So, I believe so much in it that I think it's something that needs to be restated again and again. If you think about this, that Jesus is not only the model for believers. He is that, in fact, but Christlikeness is our calling. It's part of discipleship.

We must become more and more like him, but he's the archetype of human beings. The second Adam, right? He stands for something for humanity. In other words, it's God's plan for the world is to make us Christlike - the whole world. We're hidden in that humanity that looks like Jesus. God will have us Christ, like all, or he will not have us at all. And if we refuse that pathway, we will have chosen, this is CS Lewis, "All that you will have." God will have us look like Christ. So we have to work where we see the form of Christ, the pattern of Jesus in the world. We work with that. This is how we can discern our prophetic coin.

Cause I mean, where we see the pattern emerging, the Jesus light pattern, we can be sure we're working with something good. When we see something that violates that pattern, that pattern of Jesus, you know - this can commit us to a whole lot of stuff, but it won't be left or right. It, it might be right on some things or left or say, it's going to be a third way. And I think our commitment is to walk away, not to give our hearts to false gods and idols who promise nothing, bring violence and deliver nothing. Promise everything but deliver violence, I should say. But we have got to repent of this and to recalibrate around Jesus again at this time - this is maybe the most important thing.

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I say this for the North American church, particularly the most important thing that can be done now - repent. We turn to Jesus and like the law and the seven churches - repentance to the church, we think, oh, what's that about having the church repent? The thing, read the book of revelation. Sit in churches - they're archetypal churches, then called every one of them repent. I'll take your minds out. You know, something like that.

Greg:

Oh, and I've, uh, I think I've read everything you've ever written and numerous of your books, I've read multiple times and taught them and leadership groups. And it's just such a delight to always chat with you and want to encourage people to go out and if you haven't read Alan yet, I'm guessing you have, but I'm hoping that if you haven't, you'll start cause he's an amazing thinker and leader in this space, and pragmatic as well. So, Alan, thank you so much for joining us on The Church Planting Podcast.

Alan:

Greg, a joy to be with you brother. All the very best to you and to the whole Stadia network.