

# Reflections on Church Seeding in the Frontier of Suburban Sprawl

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A post on our social feed caught our eye the other day: A satellite image of the growing city of Perth, Western Australia, with a bit of annotation on the side claiming it to be the ‘longest linear city in the world’ and measuring it at 153km north-south. We are not sure if the first part is true, but the second point is about right: Perth is pushing hard and fast to develop housing all the way from Two Rocks to beyond Mandurah,<sup>5</sup> around 60km north and

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<sup>5</sup> Pettitt, B. (2022, July 5). Opinion: Perth is already the world’s longest city, and we’ve dropped the ball on sprawl. *WA Today*. <https://www.watoday.com.au/national/western-australia/perth-is-already->

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85km south of the CBD, respectively. Until the very recent past, these had long been holiday destinations for Perth folk. Today, they mark the ends of this booming city in the fastest growing state in Australia.<sup>6</sup> A tight squeeze between the Indian Ocean and the parallel hills means that the gaps in the 150km long stretch between those two points will very soon be filled – at the far northern end, for example, where we minister, government modelling signals a planned doubling of the population from 100,000 to 200,000 residents, between 2021 and 2041.<sup>7</sup>

Our ministry heart for that northern zone – from 30km to 65km north of the CBD – is about working out how to seed new church communities into this frenzied development landscape. It is an exceptionally challenging task, not just because of the pace of development but also because of the lack of church zoning or facilities, particularly given the number of residents already there, let alone the number still planned. But we believe it is also a vital task – for the same reasons – and one we hope to encourage

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[the-world-s-longest-city-and-we-ve-dropped-the-ball-on-sprawl-20220704-p5ayy3.html?fbclid=IwAR1zNYxi5gpkL5b2ACh3GLsGk6KZZoduKoEZhrCDWBG\\_PM-uG0-3RIIntBes](https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/oct/04/the-world-s-longest-city-and-we-ve-dropped-the-ball-on-sprawl-20220704-p5ayy3.html?fbclid=IwAR1zNYxi5gpkL5b2ACh3GLsGk6KZZoduKoEZhrCDWBG_PM-uG0-3RIIntBes)

<sup>6</sup> McCrindle. (n.d.) *Is a housing crisis a new city opportunity?*

<https://mccrindle.com.au/article/topic/demographics/is-a-housing-crisis-a-new-city-opportunity/>

<sup>7</sup> An increase from a cumulative 90,255 in 2021 to 199,207 projected for 2041, for the ten northern frontier estates of Alkimos, Butler, Clarkson, Eglinton, Jindalee, Merriwa, Mindarie, Quinns Rocks, Ridgewood, Two Rocks and Yanchep; See – .idcommunity. (n.d.). *City of Wanneroo: Population Summary*. <https://forecast.id.com.au/wanneroo/population-summary>

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others to consider. To that end, we share some of what we have been privileged to witness, and some of the things the work has revealed.

### **Church ‘seeding’**

Perhaps we should first define what we mean when we say, church ‘seeding’. We would not know if that’s a ‘thing’, or if the language is used of something else, but it’s the language we have settled on to best describe what we are engaged in. Because we’re not really church ‘planting’, in a traditional sense –

- we were not sent (we were ‘called’),
- we did not ‘arrive’ (we already lived here),
- we did not take a core team with us (they came together after),
- we had not meticulously planned everything before stepping into this space (we just knew we had to move), and
- we had no funding or organisational support to start (we have to work towards those things).

Put simply, we felt called to explore how to do ministry in an area of such desperate and distant need. Soon enough, others who were also wanting local church up this way came to join us, with like minds. But it did not unfold in the way churches traditionally ‘plant’ new churches – say, in the

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'mother-daughter' mould, where everything from DNA to contingency plans are carefully cultivated beforehand.

What we felt happen, more than anything, reminds us of what Jesus described in his parable in Mark 4:26-29 –

*And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."*

In short form, our strategy was to simply open the word of God in Scripture, and pray, and then step in, and all three on repeat. And from the outset of that, we have been pedalling as fast as we can to keep up.

We have met and talked with other ministry workers and churches along the way, mind you. We know of several churches working on a mother-daughter idea to plant in our area. But the reality is that planting that way is hard, requires considerable commitment from a large core, and is therefore heavily planned – and so it takes a long time. We have come to see that there is a need for other methods of ministry to get in and start breaking up the ground,

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because churches are needed here before all the houses are built. And so, coming on three years in to our task, we are more convinced than ever that ministry in a ‘seeding’ kind of way is an important part of the mix of putting the gospel in reach of people in this kind of rapid and distant development zone.

Having different strategies will also allow for different kinds of churches to exist. Our desire is to see small, reformed churches establish – simple, humble communities (say, of around 30-50 people) that run deep in the word together. That is not so likely to happen in our context with traditional planting methods – reformed churches in Perth are relatively small in the scheme of things to begin with, so the resources to send out a ‘plant’ are also limited. Moreover, there are few churches (of any reformed denomination) on the north side of Perth’s dividing river to begin with – let alone, whether they are in a position to plant. But when you then add the distance factor, getting a core group of any size to commit to relocating 30km north – from the inner city to the outer dormitory frontier – is a pretty hard ask. Sure, it could be done, but it will not happen often, and it will hardly meet the need: Again, we are talking about a 100,000 jump in population in our zone, within 20 years. Traditional planting methods might need 10 years just to plan one of those plants. But there may not be many reformed churches able to even *consider* planning that kind of move.

Outside our reformed tradition, there are a few churches of the general size and Biblical shape we are picturing that are ministering faithfully in our area, and one that we know of has done well to now spread further afield in

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a traditional mother/daughter style plant. We take great encouragement from that: Although inner-city churches may not be able to reach up here, we figure if we can keep working out how to 'seed', it will become viable later to pursue other planting methods from a small to medium church that takes root onsite, so to speak. Indeed, as we write this article, the church we seeded – [newcitypresbyterian.church](http://newcitypresbyterian.church) – is about to try stepping into that space. Into its third year now, after being seeded 40km north of Perth, there is an opportunity to begin a new, second Sunday service in a different community, 50km north of Perth. This has always been part of our vision, but it is here much sooner than expected. Our strategy this time may be a little more calculated, but it is still nowhere near a 'traditional' plant: We refrained from planning a core team, or running any kind of 'numbers' (and in most people's analyses, nor would we have the numbers, in any sense of the word). A venue opened up, and we prayed and decided to first step into the space, and then find out. What we *do* have, though, is a clear and growing sense of our own ministry convictions, and a crystal-clear vision for Jesus. And our strategy will again be simple, and just the same – to be willing to step in to the space, and to open the Bible, and to commit it all to Him in prayer. Will it 'work'? That is in the Lord's hands. But there is an estate there that will be home to many thousands of people, and they need a local church. We are available; we are nearby; we are willing to step in and try.

### **What have we learnt?**

We are thankful for that opportunity, and very keen to keep exploring this approach. But the philosophy of ‘seeding’ church, itself, is not our goal. It is simply the method we have used (and the only method at hand for us so far). But some things we have learned through these few years have become part of our ministry DNA now, that we hope to keep going, and to encourage in others.

#### **i) The value of being small**

Small church can be incredibly nimble, flexible, and able to step into niche opportunities<sup>8</sup>... and admittedly, ‘risky’ opportunities, at that. And we have loved words of caution – they too are important – but eventually the reality calls: to be perfectly blunt, the frontier is going to require some risky thinking from churches, if they are going to meet the urgency and the need for gospel work. Being small lets you innovate ministry, and very quickly so, and this is particularly important for the frontier of development where opportunity is hard to see, and impractical for other models of church to pursue. Moreover, a lot of people really value small church – for various reasons, they struggle to integrate into big gatherings. And in a region with limited church offerings for the sheer volume of people, a lot of Christians have not found a home. We were assuming that we might bring in a lot of unbelievers, but actually many of the first influx were believers who had

<sup>8</sup> O’Brien, B. J. (2010). *The strategically small church: Intimate, nimble, authentic, effective*. Bethany House.

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been out of fellowship for different reasons. Now we realise that putting churches into new areas is not just for the 'lost' in terms of the gospel, but for those who are lost just in terms of not having been settled in a church home.

### **ii) The value of slow growth**

Seeding is almost intentionally slow. We are trying to cultivate deep fellowship, and that takes time. So, we are not interested in an 'attractional' model, and therefore the community is developing at a pace that would probably be devastating for other models of church, more dependent on finance and so forth. At the same time, we nevertheless do have a clear focus on growth. The purpose of 'seeding', after all, is to grow towards harvest. And we seek growth both in maturity, and in gospel spread. So while we see the value of small church community, we also want to see the growth of communities across the map, so to speak. If one local community should grow large, we should see that as God's work – and we needn't hinder that kind of growth. So while we think about it often, we can't be hard and fast about church size – but a growing congregation does catalyse the question, of whether and where to plant, or 'seed' again.



### **iii) The value of clarity in the general call**

While we could not have known whether or not the seed would 'take', and if so what exactly it would look like, we were nevertheless very clear about the seed itself: The gospel of Jesus Christ. So too, we spent a few months first figuring out our own personal wiring, and what kinds of contexts we could (and could not) minister into. Thinking further back, solid ministry education and experience for Jason, and the privilege of us both having sat under clear and faithful preaching ourselves in reformed churches over the past 20 or so years, had been formative for this work we are now engaged in. We can see even more clearly today how vital all these things have been towards our clarity in the 'general' aspects of our call, and we are more content with not having all the 'specifics' for ministry as we push forward. To be clear on the gospel, and clear on our theological convictions and framework, and clear therefore on what we can and cannot offer to God's people in ministry, is more the key. Consider Paul and his co-workers, sailing away on a ship or setting out on foot: They must have known very clearly their purpose in going, and the kind of ministry they had been shaped and called to give. But they could not have known what would actually unfold on the ground in front of them. Indeed, we read of the Holy Spirit changing what they planned they might do, in terms of the specifics (e.g. Acts 16:6,7). We are of course no-one and nowhere near them. But the same

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principles surely apply – we can know our general call with great clarity, yet we need to be somewhat open and flexible to what the Spirit will actually do.

### **iv) The value of clear thinking**

We have worked very hard from day one on bringing clarity to the ministry work, and to the church. We think through our own convictions and ministry principles all the time, and wise mentors keep us engaged in that task. That helps us put a clear and transparent vision to the church that we ‘drip’ feed all the time – from church culture to mission strategy, we are always encouraging our people to think clearly (and from Scripture) about their church. Clear vision, beliefs and values were written out in a simple booklet form, that our people have had from the outset (and visitors often take those home to get a clear picture of our church). And we have worked hard at transparency in all that, such as by releasing all our preaching via podcast for external eyes.

### **v) The value of training**

Like any ministry, if this is going to work in the long haul then training is vital. Some might have been tempted to leave this aspect for much later, thinking that training is for bigger or more established churches to do. We strongly disagree. We have

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consciously prioritised training to raise up more ministry workers, and trusted that God would supply them. We have taken that on as 'kingdom' training, rather than training up for growing our own church, but creating that training culture nevertheless brings a healthy, missional mindset to our church. It has taught us that a big part of ministry is watching who God brings to us, and stepping back to observe how He is stirring them, and how we can help.

### **vi) God is Able**

We thought we had a sense of the need for church in this frontier, but not like we do now. There is hurt and despair everywhere, and the wider church needs to keep finding new ways to reach out to the downcast and the lost. Yet more than ever, we feel God's hand at work in this ministry - we ourselves are woefully incapable, and this ministry initiative was somewhat lacking in perhaps every aspect - but that only makes it clearer to us that God has been the One driving this work. More than ever, we have come to know that Jesus is building his church, just as he declared as his intent (Matthew 16:18, 28:20).

### **What have we struggled with?**

There have been a few particularly big challenges we have had to contend with along the way, and are still working on now -

### **i) Eldership**

Scriptures like Titus 1:5 make it clear that elders are to be appointed in each church. We wholeheartedly agree. But we also see something else in such a verse – that there may be an earlier phase where that is not possible in a new church. We are getting more comfortable with the necessity of an earlier such phase when churches are seeded: identifying and training and appointing elders is a slow journey that requires patience, and we are sure Paul did not mean that task should be rushed (e.g. 1 Timothy 5:22). But it is hard to seed churches because of this weakness in the opening phase. So too, we have had a clear plan for denominational alignment, but that process is not one that can be hurried along either. What has been vital, in all that, is that one of the first faithful families to join us was led by a man with a reformed ministry degree, and that we have had wise and godly external mentors advising us, since long before we even stepped out.

### **ii) Finance**

Seeding could not have worked for us, were we not bi-vocational, and voluntarily on the ministry side for a good long while. A good employer has therefore been instrumental in this call. We could say a lot about this aspect, but perhaps we should simply point to the recent book by Andrew

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Hamilton,<sup>9</sup> another gospel worker up here, who has captured the need for more ministry workers to consider a bi-vocational call. Having an organic group of people come together as a new church is unpredictable in itself, but having them come to a place of trust, to be able to give and support the work of their new church, is inevitably going to take even longer. Seeding church is perhaps not the right line of ministry for those who need considerable or stable financial support. If it were not for 'tent-making' (Acts 18:3, 1 Thessalonians 2:9, 2 Thessalonians 3:8), this church simply could not have been seeded, or kept afloat.

### iii) Venue

Once upon a time, governments allocated land to churches. In those days, Perth must have had a radius more like 20km, because today, an 'old' city boundary seems to be marked by the sudden disappearance of traditional church properties. But the subsequent development sprawl that pushed north and south of that historic zone required churches to innovate. About 25km north, a host of big churches set up in warehouses in a popular industrial estate, to which northern Christians could commute. Smaller churches were able to set up in schools and community centres. But a little further along the development timeline, and further out on the frontier now today, things are not as easy.

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<sup>9</sup> Hamilton, A. (2022). *The future is bivocational. Shaping Christian leaders for a post-Christian world.* Ark House Press.

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Schools are not that interested in having churches meet on their grounds, and community centres are fewer and further between.

But there are opportunities, and they must be taken. Larger churches are managing to hire or even build in commercial or industrial zones. A considerable investment is needed for that kind of plant, but a few bigger churches have now established in our area that way, praise God. But for various reasons, 'big church' only reaches some of the population, and with 100,000 more people still coming, more solutions are needed – including, to our mind, a whole lot of small to medium churches, all across the frontier, which will not have the resources to hire space in the new economic zones. For our pursuit, we have been blessed to be able to use a few facilities – by God's providence, we are quite sure – a public beach-side park, a government-owned community hall, and a privately-owned community hub. We did not start with a 'home-church' phase – we have been doing public church, in public spaces, since the day we began. But home church may become important to explore, to keep seeding church communities across this frontier.

### **Summing Up**

Our hopes in writing this reflection on this part of our ministry in recent years have been several –

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- i. We are big on transparency – so we would love to hear from gospel co-workers who might be able to correct or shape our ministry in line with Scripture. And it is a perfect time for us to get down on paper the ‘journey so far’, and to hear others’ thoughts, as we seed a new community, 10km further north. So too, our eyes are now opening to the rural areas just beyond our suburban zone – where seeding might also be able to bring church to those who are entirely without it right now. We would appreciate all the feedback we can acquire.
- ii. We also hope that perhaps 1% of people who read this might give thought to *church ‘seeding’* like this – or something similarly small or innovative for the kingdom – to help reach this or other development areas in the world.
- iii. And more broadly, we would like to spur other workers with *all kinds of ministry models*, to reach out to these development frontiers – there are areas of rapid growth in many cities of the world where the gospel is desperately needed.

What we are doing will not be for everyone. Indeed it may not fit for very many at all. It is costly; it is risky; it is unknown; it is very hard to plan specifics; it is hard and draining work; and it is hard to know on any day whether it will not all fall apart. In short, it is ministry. And yet it is very doubtful from our reading of Scripture that ministry is supposed to

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somehow be comfortable, easy or smooth (e.g. 2 Corinthians 4:7-18, 6:1-13).

It may not even be wise, and it certainly is not failsafe. But we trust and pray that our church seeding efforts would glorify God on this frontier.

On which note, we might finish by saying – together with all of God’s servants –

*Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21)*