

My Church Planting Story

By Kevin Haah

About New City Church of L.A.

New City¹ is a non-denominational, multi-ethnic, multi-socioeconomic church plant in the historic core of downtown Los Angeles. We officially launched on September 14, 2008. As of 2012, we are composed of 20-30% of each major ethnic group—Latino, White, Black, and Asian. About 25-35% of us come from Skid Row—many from the recovery community—and the rest of us come from downtown lofts or outside of downtown. We are multi-generational, although our median age is probably in the mid-30s. A vast majority of us were unchurched before we came to New City. As of January, 2012, our average Sunday attendance is about 320-350. We have over 200 participants in our Grow and Serve Groups. In these groups, we learn, share, pray, and serve the community together. We also have about 150 people in our Serve Teams, which are the volunteer teams that serve the church. This chapter is written by Kevin Haah, the lead planter of New City.

From law to pastoral ministry

I felt a sense of God's call into pastoral ministry for a long time, but without a corresponding desire to heed that call. After college, when I was trying to decide whether I should go to law school or seminary, my parents, who were faithful, yet financially minded Christians, pitched this to me: “If you enter into ministry and change your mind later, that will not glorify God; but, if you pursue law and decide later to enter into ministry, that will glorify God. So, if you are not sure, why don’t you go to law school?” The logic resonated with me, and so, I chose to go to law school.

After law school, life had its own trajectory. My life consisted of big firms, trying to make partner, and generating business. It was about eight years into practicing law that my parents made a tearful confession. They said that God convicted them that they had wrongly discouraged me from going into ministry, and that they had been repenting. My mom said, “If you still have a sense of call into ministry, we want to fully encourage you to pursue it.” Of course, I had taken full responsibility for my own decisions, but their encouragement made a big impact on me. Six months later, my mom suddenly died. I was too busy practicing law at this time to consider going into ministry. But while two more years passed and I made partner at my firm, I felt a renewed sense of calling into full-time pastoral ministry. God gave me a deep and abiding passion for the lost. After about eight months of prayer and discernment, my wife Grace and I decided that I should leave law and pursue full-time ministry.

A Call to Plant

¹ <http://www.newcitychurchla.com/>

After finally getting my M.Div. at Fuller Theological Seminary, I was hired as an associate pastor in charge of urban ministries at Young Nak Celebration Church², an English-speaking Korean-American church I had been attending for over 12 years. One of my responsibilities was LoveLA, an outreach ministry in the parking lot of Union Rescue Mission, in the heart of Skid Row, downtown Los Angeles. We held an “outdoor revival-like” worship service every Sunday afternoon, which 200-300 homeless people regularly attended. I cut my teeth preaching there. Young Nak had started this ministry in the early 1990s and been continuing it faithfully every Sunday. I started to see an issue with it, though. Through a survey, I found that although we thought of the ministry simply as a tool to connect people to a neighborhood church, the majority of those who attended thought they were actually coming to church. I began feeling that we might be doing them a disservice by potentially taking them away from a church, where they could grow and find community, and drawing them instead to LoveLA, which had no small groups, Bible study, discipleship, communion, etc. Although there was a strong sense of the movement of the Holy Spirit, and many people gave their lives to the Lord, I didn’t see the long-term transformation that happens in the context of a church community. I started struggling with this issue.

Around the same time, I was in my office when an anonymous caller asked me this: “You guys are a church near downtown, right? Have you heard about what’s going on in downtown? [He then talked about how downtown was growing and people were moving to downtown.] What are you doing to reach out to all the new residents of downtown?” I remember wondering why this guy was calling a Korean church to ask about reaching people in downtown. We had a polite conversation. But, for some reason, this question started to resonate in my soul. I started to ask myself, “What *are* we doing to reach out to all these new residents of downtown L.A.?” I had never seriously considered what was going on in downtown L.A. until then. I started to Yahoo clip (Google was not as big then) all articles related to downtown L.A. development, and found out that there was a major boom going on. In 2003, the L.A. City Council had passed Adaptive Reuse Ordinance, an ordinance allowing old office/commercial buildings to be converted into mixed-use commercial-residential buildings. Most of the old buildings started to be converted into lofts. In 2000, the population of downtown was about 16,000; by 2005, it had doubled. Downtown was being revitalized.

Soon afterwards, at a LoveLA volunteer dinner (with about 40 people in the room), I shared about the struggle I was having with LoveLA. Then, I suddenly stopped, and I said something to the group that I heard for the very first time *as* it was coming out of my mouth: “What if we planted a multi-ethnic, multi-socioeconomic church in downtown that reaches out to both the Skid Row residents and the new loft dwellers?” I remember absolute silence after I said this. A few seconds later, I remember saying, “Yeah, but that would never work...” Everyone, including me, laughed and went on. I shoved the idea to the back of my head, but it never left

² <http://ynccla.org/>

me. From time to time, when I shared the idea with someone, I started to tear up. I wondered why I was always so moved. That's when Grace and I decided that maybe God was trying to tell us something, so we started to pray about it.

Fast-forward a few years. There was a senior pastor transition at Young Nak. After the new senior pastor was installed, I felt that it was time to explore the possibility of church planting in downtown. I had no idea how to plant a church, and I had never been a part of a church plant or even seen a church plant happen. When someone forwarded me an email about Exponential Conference³ in Orlando, Florida, Grace and I felt like we should go and learn. It was billed as the world's largest gathering of church planters. When we went, we discovered a whole world of church planters. We learned about the importance of assessment, coaching, launch teams, training, and a lot of the best practices of church planting. I started devouring information and books about church planting.

Feeling Naked at the Assessment

Grace and I came to realize that we needed to go through a church planter assessment. Several people said that assessment was one of the most important things to do when a person felt called to plant. Several books argued that one of the most common reasons for church plant failure was that the planter was not qualified, but no one had assessed him or her beforehand. We were convinced. Grace and I wanted to make sure that we got a reality check. Did we have what it took to be multi-ethnic, multi-socioeconomic church planters?

I submitted an application more than an inch thick to a church planting assessment service from a brochure that I picked up at Exponential. It was called Church Planters Assessment Center.⁴ I didn't know it at the time, but it was related to the organizers of the Exponential Conference. Grace and I spent three nights and four days in assessment at Emmanuel Seminary, in Tennessee. As Grace and I were leaving the center after the first full day of assessment, I remember Grace breaking down and crying, "I never felt so naked in my life!" It was a rigorous process of evaluation. At the end, we were given the highest recommendation to be lead planters and encouraged to pursue our vision of planting a multi-ethnic, multi-socioeconomic church in downtown L.A.

On our flight back, Grace and I began to openly envision a church in downtown. Tears streamed down our cheeks as we prayed and saw a church coming together. We started feeling like it was a real possibility.

Confirmation of the Call and Downtown Demographics

³ <http://www.exponentialconference.org/>

⁴ <http://www.churchplanting4me.org/>

Our next step was to seek confirmation of the vision from Pastor Michael Lee, the senior pastor of Young Nak, and the Session, the governing body. When I presented the vision of planting a church in downtown and what happened at the assessment, Pastor Michael was very excited and encouraging. I made a presentation to the Session, showing the data regarding the growth of downtown and presenting the vision of planting a multi-ethnic, multi-socioeconomic church. The Session confirmed our call and decided to commission Grace and me to plant this church and contribute \$100,000 for our first year. They also allowed me to transition out of my pastoral duties and become a church planter in residence for a few months. This was in September of 2007.

Core Group Development

Pastor Michael asked how many people I wanted to take with me for the church plant. He encouraged me to take at least 50-100 people with me; he was very Kingdom minded, but I declined. My target was to reach the residents in downtown, and I didn't want to start out with a core group dominated by Korean-Americans. I asked his permission to recruit anyone from church that I thought I needed, but I asked him not to encourage people to go with us. With that understanding, I started to recruit the core team, the first few people who were to become the core of the church.

The recruitment of the first 20 people was an amazing journey of God's providence and guidance, right from the beginning. Although I had specifically intended to recruit a core team that represented the diversity of downtown L.A., I frankly wondered how it was going to happen. But God had divine appointments in mind. I asked two couples from Young Nak—John and Lauren, a couple fairly new to faith, and David and Janet, former missionaries. They joined. At a wedding, I bumped into Leo, a Latino friend I had not seen for a long time, and felt led to share the vision with him and invite him. He said he had felt that God was going to lead him to something but had not figured out what it was. He told me later that he couldn't sleep that night because he was so excited about the vision. He joined. I met Akiliah, an African-American woman who works at Union Rescue Mission. She was passionate about reaching downtown with the gospel. She joined. I talked to a friend who introduced me to Aric and Booyeon, and when I met them, it was clear that God had put us together to pursue this vision together. They joined. Aric ended up becoming the church's first intern. I shared the vision with Rocky, a man passionate about discipling men, and Carlo, and they joined as well. I invited Ronald and Eugene, whom I had discipled at Skid Row, and they joined. I asked John, a thriving Korean-American worship leader to help us lead worship, and he joined.

I spent most of October, 2007 to February, 2008 meeting with people and pitching the vision of a multi-ethnic, multi-socioeconomic gospel-centered church. As people joined, we met together on Sunday evenings getting to know each other, talking about the whys and the hows of church planting. We also spent this time coming up with a name, vision/mission statement, and core values of the church. I probably made around 50-100 pitches of the vision to various people

God led me to. It was amazing who God led me to share the vision with, and how the first 20 people came together. They were about as diverse as our church is now.

Getting to know Downtown

During the core group development process and continuing into the first year of the church, our core team members spent many hours in downtown just talking to whoever we could by asking if they were willing to participate in a survey. We started hanging out at Starbucks, but ended up more at Lost Souls Café (a fitting name) and Pete's Café, a popular bar and hangout. We learned so much by just hanging out and listening to people. It was amazing how willing some people were to give their opinions on what they thought of church, why they didn't go to church, and what kind of church they might be interesting in going to.

We also spent a significant amount of time prayer-walking through downtown, taking the time to notice every building, every business, every corner, and every person. I was very familiar with Skid Row, but I wanted to make sure I got to know the loft dwellers as well. We met with existing pastors and community leaders and asked them for their wisdom. We went to neighborhood council meetings to get a feel for the neighborhood issues. We devoured the downtown demographic studies done by Downtown Business Improvement District.

Our goal was to be a neighborhood church for downtown, and so, it was important that we spend time listening to the people and discovering what God was already doing here.

Word got around to a reporter of Downtown News that we were seeking to plant a church in Downtown. They ran a front-page article about our plans to plant a church in Downtown. The angle was that churches coming back to the neighborhood was yet another sign of downtown revitalization.

Joining Stadia

During the core group development process, I researched and talked to several different denominations and networks about the possibility of joining them as a church planter. For many, I was too advanced in the process to join as a church planter. Some were too narrow in terms of required doctrines, and some just didn't have enough resources to help. I ended up joining Stadia, a non-denominational church planting organization.

The assessment center that I had gone to was run by people affiliated with Stadia. So, when my primary assessor recommended me to Stadia, I was on a fast track to becoming a Stadia planter. Stadia made sense from a lot of different angles. First, I wanted to join a church planting organization that would not impose too much doctrine or government or oversight. I generally preferred a congregational form of church government to an Episcopal or Presbyterian form of church government. Stadia plants non-denominational churches that are a part of the independent Christian church tradition. Generally, they require weekly communion and

believers' baptism, two things I was already planning to do. All other decisions and practices are up to the church.

Second, Stadia provides tremendous resources in support of church planting. In addition to contributing funds to our church directly, they brought in major support from another church—Eastside Christian Church. Stadia got me a church planting coach who was invaluable in helping me think strategically. They also gave me a project manager who helped me with numerous things—keeping me accountable to my checklist and timeline through a software called Converge (which I highly recommend), doing research on various needs like church management software or the best place to do mass mail work, filling out the exemption application, getting a non-profit status for mailing, and other things. In addition, Stadia helped create a management team (a temporary board) composed of Pastor Michael Lee from Young Nak, Bruce White of Stadia, and me. Stadia also provided church planting training through boot camps that went through the entire process of church planting. Most of all, I got to know and develop relationships with people who are passionate about church planting and have implemented many of the best practices of church planting.

Formulating the Vision

When our core team was about 10-12 people, we started formulating a vision. We all shared the raw vision of planting a multi-ethnic, multi-socioeconomic church in downtown L.A. But, we needed to refine and test the vision. I was taught at a church planters boot camp that churches grow fastest when there is a common bond outside of spirituality. They called this the homogeneous unit principle (HUP). So, they told us to study our target. At one core group meeting, we were brainstorming our target. We called him “Downtown Dude.”⁵ We started to brainstorm what we knew about a typical downtown dude: socially liberal, young, artsy, educated, relativistic, sometimes likes Jesus but definitely doesn't like the church, gay or gay friendly, etc. After this meeting, I felt a sense of unease. Something was off. Was HUP really right? I could not avoid the logical conclusion that if HUP was right, building a multi-ethnic, multi-socioeconomic church would not work.

As I thought about it, the multi-ethnic element was a slam-dunk. Downtown was already multi-ethnic; people worked and went to school in a multi-ethnic context. The question then became, would a multi-socioeconomic church work? Skid row residents and loft dwellers were extreme in their economic differences. A typical Skid Row resident lived in a mission, SRO (single room occupancy) hotel, or low-income housing. He or she received \$221 from General Relief (the County's welfare of last resort to single individuals) plus a few dollars in food stamps. On the other hand, according to research done by Downtown Business Improvement

⁵ “Downtown Dude is sort of like the “Saddleback Sam” that Rick Warren talks about in his book, *Purpose Driven Church*.

District (BID), the typical annual household income of a loft dweller was about \$100,000. We wondered how to create a community out of Skid Row residents and loft dwellers.

This struggle was highlighted when Akiliah, one of our core leaders, and I met with Scott Chamberlain, the person who planted Central City Community Church of the Nazarene, a vibrant church of primarily Skid Row residents in the heart of Skid Row. He said that his intention had been to be multi-socioeconomic, but people who were not from there dropped out. He thought it was very difficult to create a multi-socioeconomic church in downtown. I was very discouraged because I felt like the only person I knew who had ever tried to plant a multi-socioeconomic church in downtown was saying it wasn't going to work. Akiliah had more faith and encouraged me to pursue it. Grace and I kept on praying about this. The only model of a multi-socioeconomic church I could find was Times Square Church in New York. I saw a few other churches that crossed some socioeconomic lines—maybe working class and professionals together—but rarely homeless people with well-off people. I began wondering if we needed to be realistic and target just one socio-economic segment. Maybe we had to just target the loft dwellers and serve the Skid Row residents. Maybe the homogeneous unit principle was correct.

Then, one day, God spoke clearly to Grace and me. We were on a breakfast date at Starbucks. I shared with her about a tape I had listened to from a church-planting seminar.⁶ The speaker said something that struck me: The definition of success is not what happens, not the result—that is God's issue. Instead, the definition of success is figuring out what God wants us to do and doing it. I shared with Grace that maybe we shouldn't be overly concerned about whether the multi-socioeconomic model was going to work. That was God's problem. What we had to do was to discern whether it was God's call to be multi-socioeconomic. And given the demographic data and the vision that God had given us, it was very clear that He was calling us to plant a church that was not only multi-ethnic, but also multi-socioeconomic. Maybe our posture was just to obey and leave the results to God.

Grace then said something really interesting. She said that the previous night, she had been wondering how Dr. Ralph Winters, whom she had worked under at William Carey Library, was doing. He was one of the most influential missiologists of our time. So, she Googled him and ran across his autobiography. Something in his autobiography struck her, and she wanted to share it with me. So, we went online and read that portion together. This is what it said:

[A]fter we made the decision to leave Fuller we did not at any point in the next thirteen years, during which we paid off the campus, feel that God had promised us success. We only felt that the value of the goal was sufficient justification to go all out, sink or swim. I coined the phrase, "You do not evaluate a risk by the probability of success but by the

⁶ The name of the seminar I was listening to was "Church Planter's Toolkit" by Bob Logan. This was considered a classic, must-hear seminar among the older planters.

worthiness of the goal.” We were willing to fail because the goal we sensed was so urgent and strategic.⁷

The statement, “You do not evaluate a risk by the probability of success but by the worthiness of the goal,” struck us, just like the definition of success being not the result, but the doing of God's will. Grace and I felt like God was speaking the same message to each of us. When we came to that realization, we both cried and prayed together and submitted the vision to God.

We then shared our conversation with the core group. There was immediate consensus that this was the right path. So, we decided to pursue full-throttle the vision of a multi-ethnic and multi-socioeconomic church and decided *against* following the homogeneous unit principle.

The core group worked through our vision/mission statement and core values when we were meeting for prayer and discussion on Sunday nights. After a few weeks of discussions, we felt a sense that God was giving us His vision statement. Our vision statement is:

The vision of New City Church of LA is to become an inclusive gospel-centered community of lovers of Jesus Christ who connect people to God, grow together, serve the city, and extend God's kingdom.

Our vision statement was the mission statement and each word in it was our core value. There are two parts to the vision statement: what we want to *be* and what we are called to *do*.

First, we want to *be* an inclusive gospel-centered community of lovers of Jesus Christ. At the heart of New City, we are **gospel-centered**. This means that we are a bunch of messed up people living in God's grace. Therefore, we are **inclusive**. When we know we are messed up, we know we don't have the right to judge anyone; God's grace makes us inclusive. We are also a **community**, not only on Sundays, but also in small groups. We do life together, grow together, learn together, and serve together in small groups. We want to be **lovers of Jesus Christ**, to love and be loved by Him.

The second part of the vision is what we want to *do*: connect people to God, grow together, serve the city, and extend God's kingdom. We are passionate about **connecting** people to a relationship with God. It's about evangelism. We also want people to **grow together** and **serve the city**. Growing together is about living in the Spirit, which we believe means (1) building a gospel-centered foundation, (2) developing spiritual disciplines, (3) being empowered by the Holy Spirit, (4) all in the context of community. **Serving the city** is about being *for* the city by loving and serving the city. We have groups that are focused on growing together and serving the city. We are also passionate about **extending God's kingdom** through church planting.

⁷ <http://www.ralphwinter.org/autobiography/>

Starting to worship together on Sundays

Grace and I, with our entire core team, were commissioned to plant New City Church of LA by Young Nak Celebration Church in late January, 2008. We started to hold Sunday worship gatherings on the second Sunday of February, 2008. About 25 of us met at an Italian restaurant in downtown. We tried to use the worship as a vehicle for core group development.

A reporter for Los Angeles Times ran across the Downtown News article about us and asked us if she could come by and do a story about us. It was amazing to get LA Times to do a story about a start-up church of 25 people. Our church was incredibly diverse even at that time. We were multi-ethnic and multi-socioeconomic. The story was very positive and provided some encouragement for the group.

“Soft Launch”

We soon had to find another venue, and we moved to another restaurant, called e3rd, in the Arts District. The owner was very gracious to us. He charged us minimal rent to use his restaurant, which was closed Sunday mornings. This restaurant was very trendy and hip. The ambiance changed immediately. We invited as many people as we could to our Easter service and ended up with about 70 people. This was *not* our official public launch or “hard launch” of the church. We considered this our official “soft” launch of the church, sort of like opening the worship service but not officially promoting as a grand opening. We started doing the Alpha Course, an introduction to Christianity, as our Sunday worship gathering program. We met for breakfast first, had a casual singing time, and then I gave a talk. We had small group time afterward. After the Alpha Course, we launched about five Community Groups, where we did Bible study, shared, and prayed together.

We used what some people called “a dual launch strategy”—a “soft” launch to get things going and an official grand opening, a “hard” launch, to pump things up.

The Grand Opening—“Hard” Launch--at Club 740

By June, our core group had grown to about 40-50 people. We decided it was time to have an official Grand Opening of the church, a “hard” launch.⁸ We moved to a nightclub to accommodate the number we were hoping for. It was called Club 740. We didn’t move there to be a hip nightclub church, but because the owner offered it to us for free. He wanted to serve the church and the community. Actually, I insisted on paying \$200 per week, just to create more of an obligation on his part to accommodate us even when it was not the most convenient for him. It was a historic Shakespearean-type theater built in the 1920s before it was turned into a

⁸ I adopted this strategy after reading Stephen Gray’s book, *Planting Fast Growing Churches*. His research on hundreds of church plants shows that those that launch with at least 50 people on the core group grow significantly faster.

nightclub. Each Sunday, many hands, many hours, and many prayers went into preparing the place for worship. The main floor was surrounded by three bars, but we converted it into a worship space with several small tables and groups of chairs. Although the club closed at 3 a.m., the cleaning crew was still working when we walked in, and it still reeked of alcohol and sweat, which we had to air out. Even after cleaning, the floor often was sticky with beer. But the real problem was the space for our children's ministry. It was like a dungeon. There were no windows and it was filthy, but the children's ministry team did an amazing job cleaning it up and trying to create a fun environment.

We did a lot of things to get the word out and invite people to the Grand Opening. We sent blog releases to downtown bloggers. Downtown loft dwellers were very connected via a dozen key bloggers, so we tried to get them to write about us. We generated buzz by serving in the community, going to downtown events, and handing out flyers and invite cards everywhere. We used Facebook invites to create buzz, asking core team members to invite their friends. We also invested a significant amount of money sending four sets of direct mail to every resident, one per week leading up to the Grand Opening. The direct mail focused on us being an inclusive gospel-centered community, although we didn't use the term "gospel-centered."

Finally, the Grand Opening came on September 14, 2008. We had about 200 people join us for the Grand Opening worship service: about 100 new people from downtown and about 50 well-wishers who came out to support us, in addition to about 50 launch team members. There was a lot of energy. As we expected, the next few Sundays took us down to about 90-100 people, meaning that about half of the newcomers stuck. Most were unchurched, and a significant portion was gay. For me, it is very important that we reach out to the GLBTQs because about 25% of downtown loft dwellers fall into that category. Although we didn't get everyone to stick, we doubled our size through the hard launch process. It was a solid start, and from there, we started to grow steadily to about 350 in attendance by the beginning of 2012.

Moving to Los Angeles Theatre Center

Club 740's "dungeon" proved too much for our children's ministry. A few months after our Grand Opening, Los Angeles Theatre Center (LATC), the venue that we had been praying for, became available to us at a price we could afford—an answer to our prayers. It was a beautiful and clean multiplex live stage theater in the heart of the historic core. They also had large open rehearsal rooms we used for our kids ministries. They didn't use the facility on Sunday mornings, and they needed some additional revenue, so the arrangement worked out well for both parties. We joyfully and thankfully moved to that venue.

God's Provisions

Around this time, we also moved into a historic office building right across the street from LATC. One of the first things we did was to offer the Alpha Course in our office. The building owner came to the Alpha Course with his pastor because his pastor was interested in

offering it at his church. The building owner liked what we were about and offered us the use of pretty much any space in the building without charge. He had an 8,000 square foot, high ceiling, beautiful space on the first floor of the building that was not leased out which we used for fellowship, Good Friday services, baptism parties, and other events. Later, he offered us a 2,800 square foot office space at a fraction of the market rate. And he gave us permission to use for free the conference room of about 2,000 square feet right next to the office, where we have our worship team rehearsals, prayer meetings, small group meetings, and fellowship events. These have been incredible provisions of God.

Following the Stadia model, we were on a three-year schedule of declining balance of support from outside, from both individual supporters and churches. During our first year, 2008, about 75% of our income came from outside sources. During 2009, half came from outside, and during 2010, about a quarter came from outside. Last year, 2011, we budgeted for 10% of our income to come from outside sources (although we ended up receiving more). We had originally planned for outside support to be at zero this year (2012), but we decided to ask some outside supporters to continue for one more year. God has been incredibly faithful throughout the process. We've found that our offerings increase more slowly than our attendance numbers. We think it is because a majority of those who come are unchurched, so they are not used to tithing. In addition, about a third of our regular attenders are from Skid Row, and another 10-20% of us are in college or graduate school. Nonetheless, God has continued to provide for our needs, whether through unexpected offerings, giving from outside, or through amazing people who have provided us with great deals on major facility expenses.

Becoming an inclusive gospel-centered community

From the beginning, we have been as diverse as one can imagine. About a third of us are from a Skid Row mission or low-income housing, and about two-thirds of us are from the lofts or outside of downtown. We are about 20-30 percent each of Blacks, Whites, Latinos, and Asians, including many multi-racial people. We have no dominant race or group; we are about equally spread out. Our people are from their 20s to their 70s, although their median age is probably mid-30s. In addition, about 10-20 percent of our people identify themselves as GLBTQ. Most people who visit our church tell us that they have never been to a more diverse church. In fact, many say that they have never been to a more diverse gathering of any kind.

One of the things we do at New City not only during our Sunday worship gathering but also during our Grow and Serve Group gatherings is to share our stories with one another. This has helped create a culture being real with one another. One of the first persons to share was a lesbian who shared how she felt more welcomed at New City than at any other church she had been to. She said that this was the first church ever in which she openly shared her sexual orientation. She became a part of the fabric of the church, and she help create a culture of inclusiveness.

So many different kinds of people have come together and experienced life transformation here at New City. When one gay man in his early 60s came to New City it was the first time he had been to church since he left as a teenager. He gave his life to Christ and was baptized. An African-American woman who was addicted to drugs for decades gave her life to the Lord and was baptized and has been sober since. One of our key leaders shared that he had spent several years in jail for financial embezzlement; he is now one of our treasurers. We have a Muslim who became a Christian and got baptized. He is one of our leaders now. We have people going through healing from abuse as a child, from broken relationships, and from all kinds of mental illnesses. We have a Harvard grad suffering from mental illness who goes back and forth between reality and her own world, often talking to herself during worship. We have people who had spent time in jail for all kinds of felonies and have come back to the Lord and live in accountable communities together. We have investment bankers, engineers, Harvard grads, PhDs, MBAs, and all kinds of professionals and artists, as well as people who never finished high school and are struggling with unemployment. Most of us are learning from one another and engaging in relationships that lead to a greater appreciation for people we would have never naturally been friends with.

How did such a community come about? The foundation of our church is the belief that we are all messed up people living in God's grace. We constantly teach that our life, worth, and identity come by grace, as a gift from God and received by faith in the finished work of Jesus on the cross, and not by our performance, accomplishments, or how good we are. It is only by the cross, not by our works, that we are who we are. When our identity is based on God's grace, we are all equal in front of God. There is no basis for judgment or hierarchy. Without this gospel foundation, people's attempt to love those the world sees as weaker (financially, socially, or morally) becomes patronizing at best. We may try to respect them and not judge them, but in our heart, we can't help feeling that we are better than them. That attitude is dangerous when we really do community together. It will come out in little ways. We teach that we have to reframe our identity under the gospel in order for us to be truly inclusive.

Intentional about building a diverse and inclusive community

Built upon this gospel-centered foundation, we are very intentional about building a diverse community of believers. As I mentioned earlier, we made diversity a critical factor when recruiting the first 20 people—the core group—into the church. The diversity of this group made growing in diversity much more natural. But, it didn't happen without intentionality. The staff and the worship team were diverse from the beginning. Currently, we have an Asian (me), two Whites (one of which is a woman), one Latino, and one Black woman. Our webpage emphasizes diversity. When things move away from diversity, we tweak the way we do things. For example, at the beginning of the church, particularly because we started at a restaurant, we had a pretty good brunch spread (10 a.m.) before our worship service (10:30 a.m.). Everyone got to chat a little and get comfortable before we started to worship together. In fact, people sat around tables to worship. This worked great when the church was small. Even after we moved to the

theater for worship, we continued this format. But, what we discovered was that people from Skid Row always came by 10 a.m. for the brunch, whereas loft dwellers and people outside of downtown started to come a little late—10:20 or even later. I think they tried to make it on time, but they knew in the back of their minds that the worship service didn't start until after the brunch. We also found out that most newcomers always came on time. So, when newcomers came, their first impression of the church was that the majority of the people were from Skid Row. They saw the church as caring for the poor but many of them didn't see it as a church for people like them. Our goal was to create a positive first impression, and after much discussion, we decided to move the fellowship time to after the worship service. This created some interesting discussions, but we came to realize that this was an important tweak to keep a demographic balance that accurately reflected the community. It was clear to all of us that this was not an issue of discrimination against Skid Row residents. If we were doing something that made us look like the church was for loft dwellers at the expense of Skid Row residents, we would have changed that as well.

We are also intentional about reaching out to the GLBTQs. About 25% of the loft dwellers identify themselves as GLBTQ, and the rest are very open and passionate about including gays. We want to be a church where people who are gay can belong and be loved and accepted as God works in all of us. There is a tremendous hunger among gays for the gospel. Many are not satisfied in a gay church. Often, it is too much about their sexuality and feels a little watered down spiritually. They don't get the sense that the church takes a high view of the Bible. But, they want to come to a church where there is spiritual vitality without condemnation. We have struggled with how to reach out to this group.

The gospel has become our answer. This is how we express the reasons for our inclusiveness:

We are a church that seeks to thrive on trying to be like Jesus—both radically loving and accepting, and also taking the word of God seriously. We are neither a conservative church nor a liberal church. We really don't feel that the gospel of Jesus fits into those categories. We believe that Christianity is not primarily about rules or morals, but about understanding that our flaws and darkness within us are bigger and darker than we think they are AND that God loves us and accepts us more than we can imagine, at the same time. So, this means we are not a church that says that anything goes, but rather, we are a church that says we have all screwed up and therefore have no basis for judging anyone. We accept and love all people not because “we are all okay,” but because we are all messed up together. We believe that the dynamics of acknowledging both our brokenness on the one hand, and God's unconditional love and acceptance on the other hand, compel us to be humble, accepting, and loving without being judgmental.

We have become a come-as-you-are church. We have people who have been in jail for felonies, in recovery for substance abuse, struggling with homelessness, in gangs, divorced or in

codependent relationships, suicidal, mentally ill, or abused as a child. We also have people who seem to have it all together, who look “normal” on the outside. They have a job, a family, home, etc. But, as they say, everyone is only normal until you get to know them. It is so good to be a part of a church that allows for messiness to be the norm. In many ways, this creates the freedom for people to be themselves and to love one another and be loved as they are.

One of my concerns in creating a multi-socioeconomic community, particularly with people in desperate need, was that the people who had more financially would get tired of helping those who were struggling. That has not been the case. We have seen people freely helping one another. But, because a real relationship has developed between the loft dwellers and Skid Row residents, we’ve noticed that economic abuse is not really an issue. We help one another in a way that really helps and is always in context of a relationship. In addition, we are connected to many of the resources that are available for people in need. Our set-up team leader noticed that a certain member always came to church very early with his luggage and helped set up. He found out that this person was living on the streets and having difficulty figuring things out. The leader stopped by the street where this person hung out during the day and took him to PATH, an organization that helps homeless people. It just so happens that one of our members works there, so we were able to connect this person to housing.

Help between people of various socio-economic classes has certainly not been one way. The faith of many in Skid Row is vibrant, real, and powerful, and has had an amazing impact on the rest of the congregation. I think they are the most responsible for the culture of openness at our church. Some of our leaders come from Skid Row. They are an integral part of the Body at New City.

Growing Together and Serving the City

Our vision statement states that we *grow together* and *serve the city*. Our Community Groups, the small groups where we did life together, learned together, shared, and prayed together, were designed to be the primary place where we grew together. At one point, when the church’s regular attendance was about 120, we had about ten groups. The groups were vibrant. We intentionally mixed people up, not based on any affinities. Loft dwellers and Skid Row residents were coming together, sharing together, learning together, and praying together. We saw people help one another with financial needs, housing, and other needs. We saw Skid Row people influencing loft dwellers and vice versa. A vast majority of our regular attenders participated in one of the Community Groups, but over the years, the participation rate declined. By mid 2011, when our attendance was around 250-300, we only had five Community Groups left. We were trying to start up new groups, but had difficulty doing so. We tried to take a more smorgasbord approach to growing together, asking people to choose between one of four ways: a Community Group; a discipleship group; The Current, a mid-size gathering where people came together to soak in worship and prayer; or the recovery ministry or other Bible study classes. However, this approach didn’t work either. We got a lot of people involved in more activities,

but there was a segment of the church that was not connecting to any of these growing together opportunities. We had to figure out another way to grow together.

Another issue we faced was in serving the city. There was a team assigned to regularly put together volunteer opportunities. Some people came out to those events, but I was not satisfied with the number of people coming out, compared to the number of people in the church. Our goal was not just to transactionally minister and serve the people in need, but to include them into the community and develop relationships with them, learn from them, and seek to help them holistically. In many ways, we did that because the poor were already among us. As we learned to share and help one another, we were helping the poor. Nonetheless, I felt that God was calling us to do both: include people into a Jesus-centered community of sharing AND serve those outside of the community.

So, we were struggling to figure out how to restructure our Community Group system and how to get more people to serve the city. After much research and discussion, influenced by the people in the Missional community movement, we started “Grow and Serve Groups.” These groups are where we grow together AND serve the city. We currently have 15 vibrant Grow and Serve Groups of about 10-20 people each, with different genres of service for each group: anti-human trafficking, food and clothing pantry, children-at-risk, financial peace, high school group, men’s group serving Skid Row, arts, learning English conversation groups for immigrants, meals on wheels and visitations, recovery group, healing room, nursing home visitations, and street prayer ministry. We’ve had an amazing response to the Grow and Serve Groups. Even as we serve the community, the powerful element of the groups has been developing a deep community where we can share our lives with one another and become lifelong brothers and sisters in the Lord. This has been a great way to grow together AND get the majority involved in outreach and service at the same time.

Extending God’s Kingdom by Planting a Church in Every Neighborhood in L.A.

From the beginning, the vision of New City has been to start a church planting movement in Los Angeles. Our vision is not to be a mega-church for the entire city. We want to be a church for downtown Los Angeles. We want to be a neighborhood church, to love, reach, serve, and make an impact on the neighborhood. But, our vision is for the entire city. We want to be a part of planting a neighborhood church in every neighborhood in Los Angeles.

Los Angeles is composed of 119 distinct neighborhoods, ranging from about 10,000 to over 200,000 people in each of these neighborhoods. If you count the neighborhoods in the cities near Los Angeles, it’s over 200 neighborhoods. Most people don’t say they are from L.A., unless they are outside of L.A. Instead, they identify with a certain neighborhood: Downtown, Koreatown, Silver Lake, Westlake, Boyle Heights, etc. Many of these urban neighborhoods have churches with great building but also with a significant decline in membership. When the neighborhood demographics shifted, the churches didn’t change along with them. So, we see

many churches with fewer than 50 elderly people who are of a different ethnic group than the neighborhood the building is in. Also, there are churches that have a certain demographic focus—Korean, Armenian, Ethiopian, Latino, Black, etc. They are often not focused on being a church for the neighborhood, but are just located in that neighborhood, and if they do reach out, they reach out to their segment throughout the city. All of these churches may be necessary, but there are very few churches that bring people together that serve the neighborhood they are located in. That's our vision—to plant more churches that are gospel-centered, bringing the various people in their neighborhood together, and not only sharing the gospel but also being the gospel to that community by serving the community.

God has sent us several couples who are passionate about church planting. I have started to mentor them, meeting with them as a group on a monthly basis. But, I don't want to wait until New City is financially stable before we plant a church. So, in partnership with Stadia, we have put together a Los Angeles Church Planting Network (CPN) of about a dozen churches so far, which are coming together to pool resources to start planting a church in every neighborhood in L.A.

It's awesome to see how God is working to bring churches together to start a church planting movement here in Los Angeles. Our first plant is expected to be in 2012.