



Episode 94: Hangouts: Helping Churches Get Better Connected

Featuring: Mingo Palacios & Vince Freeman & Daniel Santos

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Transcript:

Mingo Palacios:

Hey everybody, welcome to the PD Podcast. My name is Mingo, your host, and like always, try to bring a relevant conversation to the table right where you're at, right inside of whatever ministry wheel you find yourself in or whatever season of church you're at currently.

Today, my pleasure and my good friend, my guest, Vince Freeman, and then always in office and my ride-or-die next to me, Daniel Santos. As we are unpacking today's episode, it's going to be all about breaking the barrier of groups, how we get people to go from this large space into smaller spaces, and some unique uncoverings that Vince had as he's been pioneering inside of a very large church, upwards of between 8,000 and 10,000 people on a weekend across several campuses. How do you find places and methods and rhythms for people to connect in smaller groups in a meaningful way?

Vince, welcome to the show. Why don't you tell us what challenges you were facing when you came up with this unique idea for what we're calling "hangouts"?

Vince Freeman:

First of all, honored to be here. It's a pleasure to be with you guys today. Being a part of such a large church really does present a lot of challenges. I always think about this experience like college. I went to a large state school, 20,000 people, and when you experience something like that, you don't need to know everybody at the school. It's impossible to know everybody. What you want is to go experience with a few close friends and have some lasting memories, create some lasting friendships, right?

I look at our church that way. There's a lot of people that are going to be here. You don't really need to know everybody in order to have what you need to have, to grow in your relationship with Jesus and with others.

Leading our Young Adults ministry in a large space, we see so many people, and they feel lost and disconnected because there's so many faces.

Last year, right before my daughter was born in September, we were getting ready to plan for 2019 and I just didn't know what to do. I was like, man, I feel like we're just doing the same thing over and over again, using that old ministry model. We have a large event. I hope that a bunch of people come, that they suddenly magically get connected there, and then they go off and do their lives – and that wasn't working.

Really, hangouts came out of a place of frustration, like are we really connecting people well? Is the model that we have sustainable for them to actually grow in friendships with each other?

Mingo Palacios:

That's really good. I love the origin piece. I think everybody struggles with having a large group gathering – and that word "large" is a spectrum. Your large group might be 30, my large group might be 300. Your large group might be 3,000. The bottom

line is that people aren't naturally inclined to go and find common denominators amongst one another in that large group and then say, "Hey, let's make plans to reconnect outside of this space/program/event."

So every church, including yours, has a groups model, right?

Vince Freeman:

Yep.

Mingo Palacios:

Describe your guys' own groups model.

Vince Freeman:

They call it the free market system. We've empowered basically anybody in our church who wants to lead a group, who goes through just a few measures to check things out to see if they're capable – if you want to lead a group, you can. We have the tools to empower you to do that, and then we'll post it online if you want people to find it.

Mingo Palacios:

And that's just like every other church's groups model. Get into a community. You found a couple of barriers, though, even looking at that model – which I think has been around, heavily marketed for like 20 years. You found some barriers with the young adult community. Explain some of those barriers to me, and then let's get into where this idea of hangouts closes that gap or is kind of like a prequel to the idea of groups.

Vince Freeman:

One of the things, as a group leader myself, I saw was that our groups model is like 8 to 10 weeks long. As a group leader, you want to find people, hopefully they feel connected to each other – sometimes you're pulling together strangers – and then you want to lead an 8 week or a 10 week study, right? By Week 4 or 5, you're hoping that 1) everyone's showed up and been consistent, which is really difficult with young adults too. 2) You hope that they actually like each other and that they've forged this friendship that they can share deep and maybe dark things in a safe space.

But sometimes I saw you're actually making progress and then the group is over. You've gone through the 10 weeks, you finished the study, and you're like, man, we were just getting started and now it's over. I have led groups that have been successful and have

lasted over a year, but for the majority, unless you've got the Trifecta of people who love each other, a great study to go through, and people being consistent, it was really hard to make that consistent model that worked for us.

Mingo Palacios:

So, in comes this inspirational moment where you come up with this idea of people – well, I don't want to burn the one-liner, because it's yours.

Vince Freeman:

Yeah. First of all, I need to give a shout out to Aloha Church, to Dru and Trish Tevis. Part of this idea came from what I saw them doing. They were starting their church and they said, "Hey, we've got opportunities for people to hang out with some of our church leaders. It's going to be ping pong on Friday or grab a drink with somebody on Saturday or whatever." I was like, man, I wish we could do that, but really open it up and expand it so that we've got stuff happening all the time and anybody can do anything that they want to.

The way that I define hangouts and the way we've shaped it at our church is they're an invitation to expand the community and the Kingdom of God by doing what you already love to do. Instead of limiting it to just a few people, we said, "Hey, anybody in our community can host one of these." I don't want you to think too hard about what it is that you want to do. What is it that you already are doing that you are willing to say, "Hey, this is happening this Saturday and I want to open it up so that people can be a part of it"?

Mingo Palacios:

So good. Now, as a pastor speaking on this side of that vision, I saw, looking at our own church, we had the large group thing pretty much down. Everybody knows they come for Sunday. I've got a regular rhythm between now four services. People pick their big group. The problem was we only had onboarding really like a growth group, small group, connect group, D group, L group – whatever your church calls them, it was seasonal. It was like, "Hey, these are the big seasons where we're telling people 'jump into a group!'"

If you've got a new person visiting a church, they have no idea when those signals are. You're assuming that they're just going to wait at the train station for the next "all aboard" moment for them to get connected. What I felt was hangouts was this great solution for the interim.

It gave people permission, which is such a huge value of mine, to examine what they love and make the connection that God can be actively working through them in something that they already love. As long as it aligns with God's values, right? We're not like, "Hey, we're getting smashed at my favorite bar. God's going to work through it, man."

But to me, it was such a great solution that didn't require a ton of management. We vet, obviously, what those hangouts look like to a certain degree. But it gave permission to people to open the doors.

I love that it's been everything in our camp – and I've got Daniel on the episode because he's hosted several – come and learn how to pour great coffee, come to the movies. I hosted a hangout with my friend, Matt Markley. We wanted to go to the movies and we said, "Let's just make this a hangout."

Instantly, we made the call. How soon was it, Daniel? When I texted you?

Daniel Santos:

Maybe like 3 hours before. It was the morning of.

Mingo Palacios:

Yeah, it did not take a ton of pre-planning. I just said, "Hey, there's an 11:00 showing." I sent a text message at 8:00, "Let's make this thing a hangout," and what would have just been the two of us going to the movies turned into 12 of us.

Vince Freeman:

That's the beauty of it.

Mingo Palacios:

Twelve people are like, "I hung out with my pastor and we went and saw Godzilla. It was really random."
[laughs]

But Daniel, you're on the practitioner side of this. From visionary (Vince) to pastor (me) and the

solutions that I'm experiencing, what has it done for you in your own observation of hosting hangouts and going to certain hangouts?

Daniel Santos:

I think hosting a hangout was super fun because, again, it was just doing what I was already doing.

I love to pour coffee, and I was like, "I don't think anyone's going to drink any coffee at 8:00 at night," but you would be surprised by how many people drank coffee that night just because they were invited. I put out some tables, I put out a ping pong table, I played The Office on the TV and it was just playing in the background, and I was just brewing coffee. I had maybe 12 or 13 people who I knew, but they didn't know each other.

Mingo Palacios:

Yeah, you're the common denominator.

Daniel Santos:

Yeah. I just made that, "Hey, I'm having a hangout. Come hang out. Coffee, board games, and just hang." A ton of people came. Everybody who was there got connected who may not have gotten connected any other way, just by coming on a weekend. So having a hangout with super fun. Going to hangouts is I think even more rad because you get to experience it from the other side of the table.

Going to the movies, it didn't even require a week or a day of like, "Okay guys, let's make sure everything is right, let's make sure that all the planets are aligned." It was just a matter of making a text message go out. "Hey, I'm having a hangout." Just put a picture of the movie cover on the Instagram and then we'll just see who comes. And that's what we did. Within like 3 hours, there were 12 of us outside the movie theater, like "Oh hey, what's going on?"

Mingo Palacios:

Introducing new people that have never met, people who don't go to our church.

Daniel Santos:

It was super rad. It was super fun.

Mingo Palacios:

I will say observation-wise, coming out of it, it drew out an opportunity for generosity that wouldn't have happened.

Somebody said, "Hey, I'd like to pay for everyone's movie tickets." That wasn't an implied pressure. It was just somebody saw the gathering, and I think the Lord moved, and that person's generous heart said "I'd love to buy everyone's movie tickets." So that person is responding to Jesus in an unfiltered and non-pressured way.

Daniel Santos:

Super raw, honest way.

Mingo Palacios:

I'm not making a generous ask from the platform, like "We'd like to go to the movies, but we need somebody to fund it." It's really this organic response to, I think, the heart of God. It's to bring people together. It's to love one another well. It's to share the things, like you said so perfectly, Vince, that you're already doing. The pressure that people put on themselves is like "What am I going to do that's going to draw people in?"

It's like, you're asking the wrong question.

Vince Freeman:

Exactly. Yeah, and I think the beauty of it is that this is not a novel idea. I didn't invent this idea.

Mingo Palacios:

Nope, I'm giving it to you.

Daniel Santos:

Stamp your name on there.

Mingo Palacios:

Roll credits. Vince Freeman.

Vince Freeman:

Other churches have been doing this, other apps have been doing this. Meetup has been around for years. I think we just found a way to make it work for us. Sometimes historically the Church can seem behind in trends or technology or whatever. We said, how do we get out there? How do we get a little bit ahead and say "this is a way to connect people"?

Mingo Palacios:

Let's get into the logistics, because there's some listeners out there and they're like, "There's no way this high-pie-in-the-sky idea is going to work for us." You have done some hard work to create the infrastructure for how to receive ideas for hangouts, how to vet, qualify, and then promote them. Can you unpack that?

Vince Freeman:

Yeah. Just a couple of basic steps. One, we run it through Google. The form that we have any potential hosts fill out, it's a Google form.

We have text codes at our church, so we just say, "Hey, if you'd like to host a hangout, text the word 'hangouts' to 52525." They're going to receive a form in that text message that has 10 questions. It's just basically, "What's your name? Where's the hangout going to happen? What is it? Basic details. Give us the address in case of emergencies so we know where everything's at, and then the way that you want to be contacted as the host. Whether that's your Instagram handle, your email, or your phone number, what's the best way to contact you?"

Then at the end, you can either have a video that goes up, a little 15 second video explaining what your hangout is – that worked really well for our community – or you can just do a photo of the host so people have a little bit of an idea of who they're going to work with.

Then we post that on our Instagram Stories every single time they happen. We have a two-day turnaround. So we just say,

"Give us two days, make sure that your hangout is going to happen in two days, and then we'll post it there." They go on our Stories and then we keep them up as posts. On the backend, it all comes to a spreadsheet. We're able to vet everything. If there's questions about a hangout, we can just call them, make sure everything's great.

We launched this at the beginning of February 2019, and we've had just over 120, which is awesome for us.

Mingo Palacios:

Wow.

Vince Freeman:

That's 120 opportunities that we did not pay for, that people, of their own volition, said, "I want to be a part of this. I want to see how God can use me through what He's already gifted me in." When people own it, then you see the real fruit. If we hosted 120 events, it

would be more pressure on me and more pressure on our leaders. But now people are saying, “I want to be used by God out in the community with what He's already given me,” and that's the beauty of it.

Mingo Palacios:

That's good. Have you solved the problem of – not even a problem, but there are people out there who are saying, “Well, we paid \$100 grand for the small groups curriculum. We've got to get them into that.”

Vince Freeman:

Like you said earlier, for us hangouts is not the full solution, but it's an onramp. Our church has been focusing on discipleship this year, and part of the reason why hangouts are so great is because young adults, typically we're going to struggle making disciples because we don't know how to make friends. Not every young adult, but a lot of young adults I see. They're like, “Man, I've not really sat down with somebody I don't know and just had a conversation.” hangouts provides that space. So it's the onramp.

And if someone's been coming a lot or if they've been leading or hosting a hangout, I say, “Hey man, you should think about leading a small group. Get together with some of the people that have been coming to your hangout and see if that's something you'd be interested in.” It doesn't replace that curriculum, but it really feeds right into the ecosystem of our church.

Mingo Palacios:

Back to wearing a pastor's hat, here's what I love out of what you just said and the picture that you painted. Our church's mission is “people helping people find and follow Jesus.” As the pastor, I've been really diligent about looking at all the programs and all the things that we offer to people to make sure that we're aligning people to that mission.

When we got to examining our small groups, it was kind of a really random patchwork of options. Some people are doing a Francis Chan thing, somebody's going into Joyce Meyer. Some people love to go to the beach and watch the sunset. All of those were qualifying as growth groups or small groups, and I couldn't with great conviction say that this was people helping people find and follow Jesus.

What I loved about the idea of hangouts was it satisfied the appetite of people coming together.

Actually, that was a big missing component for our church. People already knew the rhythm of a growth group or a small group, but it still inclined itself to a small classroom. One professional speaking the majority of the time, and then maybe, if you get through the lesson, people can ping-pong their own ideas around. A hangout is purely relational. This is how we've coined it for our church: it's people helping people find and follow friends. Find each other, find community to be connected to in a significant way. I don't think you can have one without the other. I think you've got to have viable relationships before you go deep.

Vince Freeman:

Yeah. I mean, you look at the early church in Acts 2 – fellowship, teaching, the breaking of the bread. The fellowship is a core part of that. You can't ignore that. Look at what Jesus did. His disciples followed him because they knew him. He spent time with them.

I think sometimes we relegate the growth of someone to “Are they in this group? Is that how they're growing?” It's like, do you know what they like to do? Have you ever done anything outside of the church with them? Oftentimes that's where the best “ministry” conversations happen, where you're playing basketball, and afterwards you guys are just sitting around and they're like, “Man, I'm really struggling in my relationship.” That's the opportunity to minister.

Mingo Palacios:

I'll throw a C. S. Lewis quote in there to make this real Christian. He said, “humanity experiences the most love when we're doing something side by side, not face to face.” I believe in that. I think there's a lot of weight to that. I don't know the book that he says it in, but C. S. Lewis said it, so this qualifies as a Christian conversation.

Tell me some inhibitors, because I know that people are going to say, “I want to do this, Vince, I hear the mechanics.” What are some of the early learnings that you've had as you've been deploying them?

I'll tell you one inhibitor to get your mind going. The first thing that people asked me when I hosted my ping pong hangout was, "Dude, let's do this every week." I didn't want to commit to it because I'm like, dude, I don't know what next Wednesday holds for me.

Vince Freeman: Yeah. That's one of the things. It's an inhibitor, but it's also the beauty of it because someone's like, "Man, I wish we did this all the time." Then you say, "Do you know that you can actually do this?"

Mingo Palacios: Which is what I said.

Vince Freeman: Yeah. Whenever you're free – and that's the thing. With a small group, you're kind of locking everybody in. "Can everybody come this Tuesday at 7:00 p.m.? If not, then we've got to move the times around." Hangouts, it's like, "I've got time to do this this week. I might not have time to do it next week, and that's okay." I always encourage our leaders, could you consider doing one per month for one hour?

That's just kind of the standard right there.

Mingo Palacios: And that sets the model, too. I did the same thing with ours. I asked Daniel, who's on our staff, including the rest of our staff, "Hey, I want everybody to try one as a model. Set the model and set the pace so we don't start asking people to do something that we ourselves haven't gone through," because there is an awkwardness to opening up.

Vince Freeman: And it takes time. I've been hosting a basketball hangout almost every Saturday for 4 months. The first 3 months, we basically had four or five random people show up. The last month we've had 20 people almost every Saturday.

Daniel Santos: That's crazy.

Vince Freeman: Once you can get over that hump of like, "oh man, nobody's showing up," if you can just be consistent – because people see it and they're like, "Is this guy for real? Is this girl for real? Are they really caring about this? They didn't just do it because it was a new thing

the church was doing?" If you really have love for people, you'll see it grow.

So getting people to be consistent. Finding people who you believe would be great hosts and are already doing things that would be a great qualifier for a hangout. That's a big thing I do.

I'm like, "Oh man, you play soccer every Saturday. Have you ever thought about hosting that as a hangout?" So that's another big thing.

One issue we have had, though, and this is something we're working on, is the majority of our hangouts are posted on social media. Some people say, "I don't have social media. How can I find out about it?" A lot of our community is on social media, so we are working ways around it. But the best thing I say is make sure you're inviting people face to face as well. I host my basketball one, but I also text guys, or when I meet new people, I say, "Hey, I'm doing this thing. Do you want to come?" That way I'm not just relying on the social media aspect.

Mingo Palacios:

Another classic error of church is that you make an event and you just expect people are going to show up without getting a personal invitation. What were some of the fears you had when you launched your first couple of hangouts, Daniel?

Daniel Santos:

Just being afraid that – obviously, one, that nobody would come. Like, what if nobody wants to –

Mingo Palacios:

What if you get skunked?

Daniel Santos:

Yeah, you know what I mean? Another fear was like, what if nobody gets along? What if it's just awkward and it's like, "I'm not about what you're about"?

Mingo Palacios:

Have you ever had a political hangout where you're like "hey, let's talk politics"? [laughter]

Daniel Santos:

Not yet.

Vince Freeman:

Church and state, guys. [laughter]

Mingo Palacios: "Let's talk gender roles" hangout. You guys got that one yet?

Daniel Santos: Not yet. But you know, if it happens, I'd be down to just see... [laughter]

Mingo Palacios: How do you address that as the pastor for a community that's hosting tons of them? When somebody says "I'm afraid nobody's going to show up," what do you tell them?

Vince Freeman: I say that's one of the important reasons to do what you were going to do anyway. If I go play basketball and nobody shows up, guess what? I'm still going to go play basketball. And sometimes a little bit more work goes into it, if you're going to be doing a coffee thing and you're preparing for it. But I always encourage people, make sure you've invited people and get a sense of who you think is going to be there. Don't just put it up there and say, "Hey, I'm going to do it." Be like, "Hey, do you think this is something you could come to?" and you've personally invited, you've invested in people. People want that extra touch.

So I just encourage them, keep going, keep doing it. Usually when people don't show up, it's because either they haven't invited anybody face to face, or they may have done it at a weird time.

Mingo Palacios: Yeah, that's fair. I love telling people, listen, if you say yes in ministry, the obedience box is checked. It's not about who shows up; it's that you said yes to trying. There's something between you and Jesus that happens when you say yes out of a response that is an inclination that happens internally. Don't overlook that, and don't minimize that, either. Don't build your belief of whether or not it was a successful thing based on how many people did or didn't show up.

Vince Freeman: Yeah, the average size of most of our hangouts has been four to five people.

Mingo Palacios: So good. Take note of that when you put expectations on the table for your own people.

Vince Freeman: Yeah, and some of them have grown and they've blossomed into 30 because they meet at a regular time. But a lot of them, it's four to five people, and that's the beauty of it because they have gotten to know each other. Because that's really who you want to know when you walk into a room.

Mingo Palacios: Most absurd hangout that you've seen that you're like, "there's no way this is going to work"?

Vince Freeman: Someone wanted to do a lightsaber dueling hangout.

Daniel Santos: That sounds awesome.

Mingo Palacios: [laughs] Daniel will be there.

Vince Freeman: I don't know if they actually ended up posting it.

Daniel Santos: I will bring my own lightsaber.

Vince Freeman: But I loved it because I was like, man, there's a group of people out there who are like, "this is what I want to do."

Mingo Palacios: "This is going to be awesome."

Vince Freeman: And that's the beauty of it, because our ministry probably would have not facilitated a lightsaber event on its own.

But someone out there was like, "No, this is what I love and I want to meet people who want to do that."

Mingo Palacios: I'm about that. Let me speak to the generational application here, because I had challenged everybody on our staff to host a hangout. We have a guy on our staff, Ken Huff, who's pushing – how old is Ken?

Daniel Santos: Dude, he's like 80 something.

Mingo Palacios: He's in his eighties, and he got the concept. He knew, "I'm going to do something that I already do." So his hangout was, "I'm going to host a hangout at the Organ Pavilion at Balboa Park." I was like, dang it, nobody's going to show. It's going to be the one guy. Daniel, close the story.

Daniel Santos: So 12 people showed up to his hangout. I couldn't believe it. I was like, no way. Day 1 he sends me a text, "Hey Daniel, can you post a picture of the Organ Pavilion and just make it a hangout?"

I was like, "Sure, yeah, I think I have something in my bank. I guess I can pull a picture up." I did. So it went up maybe like a week beforehand, and then a day or two beforehand, like how you were saying, Vince. And 12 people – Dez was there.

Mingo Palacios: Yeah, and Dez, qualifying, is like in his thirties, and he shows up for a guy who's in his eighties to hang out. Dez was like, "I wasn't doing anything. I checked the feed, there was a hangout, I showed up."

Vince Freeman: So good.

Daniel Santos: It was super cool.

Mingo Palacios: You've got to know that the fruits locally for us have been amazing. I think it has actually made stronger, below the surface, root-style connections that has made our church better, because people aren't afraid that what they love could be used by God. As a pastor, that is the greatest joy, to say what you're passionate about outside of this place actually does more good for the Kingdom than the two, three, four expressions of ministry. So many people I think are quick to dismiss what they love because they don't see it on Sunday, and it couldn't be farther from the truth when it comes to our personal relationship with others and Jesus.

Vince Freeman: Jesus hung out with so many fishermen. That was not Jesus's trade, but he went and did things with the people who were around him. It's just an invitation to say, get involved in someone else's life.

Mingo Palacios: Such a good episode. I hope that there are people that are listening to this that risk big.

Here's what you don't have to do. You don't have to roll out a jumbo campaign. You don't have to change the whole rhythm of your church. I would suggest, as a person that has a full church that I have to think and

manage over, introduce the idea in one small sector of your church and just measure its implications there.

Then see if it can be adopted across others that make it work.

Vince Freeman:

Yeah. Right now it's just being housed within our young adults community, and we're actually going to transition soon to do staff hangouts. So we've not really expanded this to our entire church, but we're tweaking it. We're seeing how well we can manage it and how we can improve it.

Mingo Palacios:

I love it. Vince, if people want to get more information on maybe some of the technical things that you've built, what's a great way for them to get connected to those assets? And then two, what's a way they can get connected to you if they want to be more directly connected to inspiration as you uncover it?

Vince Freeman:

Yeah, absolutely. My Instagram handle is @vincethevisionary. You can also email me if you don't have Instagram, vincent.freeman@sdrock.com. I'd love to get connected.

Mingo Palacios:

So good. One last piece of advice you'd give to anybody listening to today's episode as just a final push of encouragement?

Vince Freeman:

When it gets difficult – because it will – continue to cast the vision. Love people well, and give them opportunities to do what they love to do, to bring people closer to Christ.

Mingo Palacios:

So good. Vince, I love you, dude. Thank you so much for sharing what God is doing uniquely in your ministry with thousands of pastors. I'm believing this is going to change the framework of church, and it's going to do it in the most humble way, which is the way we want it.

Vince Freeman:

Exactly.

Mingo Palacios:

I want my name associated with it. I want people to know Jesus because of it.

Vince Freeman:

Yeah. Tweak it. Use it how you can.

Mingo Palacios:

Love it. We'll talk to you guys soon.

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