

Brandon Cox: Hello and welcome to Advance by Purpose Driven. A podcast where we find healthy churches and interview their leaders to share their stories and their secrets with you. I'm your host, Brandon Cox. In every episode you'll learn from the successes and the setbacks, of ministry leaders, that develop intentional strategies for leading healthy disciple-making churches. Our goal is simply to equip and encourage you on your own path toward growing a healthy Purpose Driven Church.

All right, welcome back everybody. I'm Brandon Cox host of Advance and we tell stories of leaders in healthy churches. We draw out of that some lessons to kind of pass along to you and today I've got a real privilege of having a church health award winner. I just saw him on stage moments ago receiving the plaque and the medallion and all of that. Mark Lee from Vantage Point Church. Mark, thanks so much for being here.

Mark Lee: Oh, it's great to be here with you, Brandon.

Brandon Cox: Tell us, maybe just, we'll dive right in. Tell us a little bit of your story and how you got to Vantage Point and what the last 11 years have been like.

Mark Lee: Yeah. Okay. So it was about, I don't know, maybe a while ago, about 18 years ago that I was part of a church plant. And after I left that church plant, I thought, "My gosh, I never want to ever be a part of a church plant again."

But God just has a funny sense of humor. I went to the largest church that I'd ever attended and been a part of my entire life. Church was 400 people. They had two acres of land and I thought I had just died and gone to heaven. And it was that senior pastor that always had the vision for church planting. So he's not a visionary by nature. He was more of a shepherd. Was at every baby being born, every single surgery, always at the hospital. And so God just put this vision on his heart to plant a church. So he came to me and he said, "Hey Mark, I know you're coming on staff part time, but would you like to start our young adult ministry and plant this church all at the same time?" And I said, "Oh man, you are crazy if you think I'm going to do something like that."

But it was at the church's 39th anniversary that he wanted me to teach with him about. He was going to talk about the past 39 years of faithfulness to this church. He wanted me to talk about the future and his vision of planting this new church and so I was like, "Okay, yeah, I like to teach. If you want me to teach with you, I'll go ahead and teach with you." So all of a sudden then I started researching why it is that we should start new churches. And the apologetics of church planting. You and a lot of your audience probably even know about this, that 80% to 85% of churches in North America plateau and decline. I didn't know this, but that Christianity and that the message of the gospel is experiencing revival all over the world except for two places. And that is Europe and North America.

Yeah. And that's when I came across the famous C. Peter Wagner quote, that the most effective way of reaching unchurched people for Christ, was the planting of new churches. And you have to understand that I was always a part of super small churches that were great family environments, but never really reached too many people for Christ. And I thought like there are people out there actually coming to know the Lord, like the greatest move of God could be something that I get to participate in and not something that I just read about online. So I went to the senior pastor and I said, "Hey, I kind of feel like God is... You're interviewing church planters right now. I kind of feel like maybe God is calling me to do this, but I want to hear God's confirmation through you. So if you feel like I'm the church planter, I will go. But, if you want me to stay, I will stay for the rest of my life."

And he said, "You know what? I feel God's calling in this." So because of that, this pastor that I call not too visionary, he stepped up in front of a church of 400 people and he said, here's my church planter and we're going to raise a whole bunch of money for a group of people that you've never met. And for a church building that you've never ever stepped foot on and 100% of that capital campaign... Not just 10% of that campaign. 100% of that campaign was all pointed directly at us. And so I think it's because of that, I mean, his blessing just really set us up for success in the future. It's been a great run.

Brandon Cox: That's such a big lesson in that that I meet so many church leaders who think we'll do that someday. We'll plant a church someday. We'll get generous someday when we can afford to. But you were in a spot where somebody got generous before they maybe were ready to be generous.

Mark Lee: So yeah. Or on the flip side, you have church planters. I think all visionaries, at the end of the day, there is this entrepreneurial spirit that wants freedom and they want authority. But freedom and authority gone a little bit too awry can be a very dangerous thing in a church planter. And so you can go into the church planting world just because you want freedom and authority, but you really have to look at your heart because if that's why you're going into it, like that's the wrong reason.

Brandon Cox: Yeah, that's very true. So you got started 11 years ago, launched... Tell us about how the launch went.

Mark Lee: Yeah, so one of the things that we really wanted to do is regardless of, let's say, size of this church... Now we did have a goal of, we knew that 200 was the hardest growth barrier to break. We're like, we don't know what God has in store, but we want it just from a practical standpoint, we want to try and break that from the beginning and then never look back. So that was our tangible goal. But really the vision of this church was that we wanted to come into a community, a brand new community that didn't have too many churches and we wanted to be able to show the love of Christ in a very, very tangible way. So from the very beginning, man, we went out there and we were passing out bottles of water at the intersection. We were partnering with schools to help

bring donuts and coffee and we bring the In n Out truck to the school every year.

So, we just wanted to be a blessing to the community that we live in. So we started 11 years ago. When we had our first preview service. People were asking me how many chairs did we set up? I'm sorry, I don't know. I've never done this. People are asking me how many Sunday school teachers do we need? I don't know. We have like an idea of how many people would we want to have there. But then at the end of the day, I never knew. But then when people first started coming through those gates that I had no idea who they were. Like I was happy that my mom was there. I was happy that my dad was there. But when I saw people coming through those gates, I had no idea who they were. Like I just thought, "Oh my gosh, like this is really happening."

So that was, I just remember literally going behind the screen and just like crying. That this dream was coming to fruition.

Brandon Cox: It was pretty awesome. I think when we talk sometimes about bringing heaven to earth. And then I hear of a church that gives away In n Out. That's heaven.

Mark Lee: Double double with grilled onions, animal style. Amen.

Brandon Cox: I'm getting hungry right now. And some of our listeners are over on the East coast and they've never had this privilege.

Mark Lee: Okay. We'll put it like this: Shake Shack. We brought this Shake Shack truck to them. So there you go.

Brandon Cox: Awesome. So how do you describe Vantage Point Church today? Like if I were, if you met me on the street, I'm going, I'm interested in going to a church. You would say, "Hey, I pastor a church. That is..." What are you most proud of?

Mark Lee: Yeah, I would say that I pastor a church and what I would say to a person on the street may even be different than what I would say to like let's say a pastor or something. Not that we have two separate visions, but if I'm just meeting somebody on the street who's unchurched, I would say something along the lines of, "Hey, you know how maybe your impression of a church is that a church just constantly thinks about what it can take, what it can take from people, what it can take from the community. Hey, the vision of this church is that we want to be a benefit to the community. We want to give and we want to be known for our generosity. And at the same time, we want to help connect spiritually disconnected people from God to God because we know that that ultimately is our life's purpose." And that's what it's all about.

Brandon Cox: That's awesome. Very awesome. And you guys have reached a lot of people who were not part of God's family before. I mean that's something that catches my attention. What, what do you think has been the, I don't want to say secret

sauce, but the, what is part of Vantage Point's DNA that keeps you moving toward loss people?

Mark Lee:

Yeah. I think one of the things that helps towards that is that, especially for me, I never grew up in a Christian home. I never grew up in a Christian family. And so I have a very keen awareness of what it was like for me to go to church for the first time in college. I stepped down into a church basement. How freaky is that? Like nothing good can happen in a church basement. Like what are they going to sacrifice? Animals are what? What are we going to have a seance? What in the world is going to happen at this church basement?

And then the one thing that really struck me about that group was their passion. And I thought, "Man, that group of people has something different than what I have." But at the same time, they also spoke in code and they had a very different language. They had a very different way of doing things. I couldn't wear certain t-shirts because they were offensive to the masses at large. I mean, it was a very foreign environment to me. And so for good and for bad... Like I'm just a normal guy, I just taught in a kind of a normal language. However, though, I've been a Christian for what I don't know, like 20, 23 years, 25 years, something like that.

And even me, as I become more and more encased in the Christian community, I use words like gospel and I use words like gospels and I use words like sin. And as much as possible, I use words like lost people. And as much as possible, what I try and do is I try and not speak in code. I try and say things like, "Well, the message of Christianity that most people know as the gospel," or I say the biographies of Jesus that are known by Christians as the gospels. Or sin being our spiritually disconnectedness from God manifesting itself in our selfishness or us... Because when you talk to an unchurched person about a sinner, that's somebody who... I don't know. That's somebody who is a pedophile. That's somebody who is someone else and not me. And so what I want to do is I just want to bring that language down into a way that everybody understands.

And I think honestly, vulnerability and humor just speak so much to our culture. People want to know you're not perfect. They want to know that you're like them, that they can identify there... They'll respect your strengths, but they'll identify with you and your weaknesses. And so I try and be vulnerable on stage, but even humor, when I first started out as a youth pastor, like you have a captive audience. You have an audience that is there because they have to be there. So in the back row, oftentimes you would see this kid who's like leaning back and he's got his arms crossed and it was always my objective, my joy to just tell a joke, do magic tricks in the beginning of the sermon to do whatever I could just to get that kid to unravel his arms. Because if I could do that, then I knew that I could get through to him. And so I'm just, I'm just a youth pastor in a senior pastor body, I guess.

Brandon Cox:

I love that. I love that. What's the most exciting thing right now at Vantage Point that you see going on?

Mark Lee: Yeah, yeah. I think the most exciting thing outside of the fact that personally we've been portable for 11 years and now we're finally under construction on our permanent home.

Brandon Cox: Which is sweet.

Mark Lee: Which is great. God has uniquely positioned us to be one of just a few permanent religious sites within cities of us. So it's us and just one other church that has property and has a building. But I think on the flip side, outside of just a building, because I myself know that the church, it's about people. And yeah, it's about gathering people, but it's not just about gathering people. It's about helping those people grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ ultimately.

And so I think the way that we put it originally is like this. That it used to be that, that we have moved in our ministry from, from security to significance. So what I mean by that is this, in the beginning of our ministry when we first launched the church, like nickels and noses, attendance and offering was extremely important to us. And it still plays a role in our metrics right now. But that was a metric of survival for us. Okay. But that's not a metric of survival for us anymore. And so all of a sudden, as a habit, we can continue to do that. When that isn't measuring the most significant thing that we even view in our hearts. So I put it almost like this. When a baby is born, birth weight and length is so extremely important to us. Because those are metrics of survival.

If I go home to my wife after visiting a baby, the first thing she's going to ask me is "How much does the baby weigh?" And I'd be like, "I have no idea." She's like, "How can you not know how much the baby weighs?" "I don't know, seven pounds, three ounces, something like that." Somewhere in there. But if I were to ask a teenage girl how much she weighs and how, what's her length, those are inappropriate questions. Yeah, because we've gone from security... Or we've gone from survival now to significance. We asked more questions about significance at that point. And so we felt like at some point we have to transition the value of our ministry. And so right now, one of the things that we say that we've really valued, especially in this year, is outreach. We've gone, okay, "What's the why to why we exist?"

Because there was a season where we started it as a very outreaching church, but then the church gets a little bigger. And they're more small groups that need to be had and people are complaining that we don't have these ministries and we don't necessarily have to give them those ministries. But at the same time, we thought there's complexity creeping in our organization. Let's go back to why we exist. So, we're like, we need more of an outreach. We need to go back to that. But another thing that we thought too is that at the end of the day, like the purpose of Vantage Point is not to put on a service. The purpose of Vantage Point is not to put on programs because those programs exist not for themselves, but they exist to help move people in their relationship with God. And so right now the big focus at Vantage Point is, "who are we discipling"?

Who are we helping to grow in their faith? And not just discipleship. I don't think discipleship and leadership development are necessarily the same thing. I think leadership development is a subset of discipleship. But that's one of the big things that we're talking about right now. Are you such a control freak that you have to do everything by yourself or are you going to do for somebody else what somebody did for you once upon a time. Where they came up to you and said, "Hey, you'll probably never say yes to this, but I think you could preach in front of a group of kids and I think you could do a pretty good job at that." And of course my reaction in the beginning was like, "You got to be kidding me. I just received Christ. I don't even know who Joseph is in the Bible."

Like what would, what on earth would make me competent enough to give a sermon? But it was somebody else going, "No, I think you could do it." I almost am leery of the person who was like, you know what? I think I should be preaching a sermon. It's like, Whoa. Back off there.

Brandon Cox: So I'm connecting a couple of dots here that really excite me. In the beginning of this interview, you talked about the status of Christianity in America. 80%, 85% of churches struggling. There's revival elsewhere in the world, but not so much here. And then jumping way over to this point where you talk about we have people in our churches that just need to be tapped on the shoulder. And I start to connect those dots and go, "Man, we could really change communities and change a nation if we just tap more people on the shoulder." That's a cool thought.

Mark Lee: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Because at the end of the day, it's not programs that change people. It's people that change people. It's those people that run those programs. And the problem is even those programs are a flash in the pan. They're here one day, they're gone the next. And ultimately it's that relational. We all talk about this, that more is caught than taught. But for some reason we keep teaching. For some reason we keep playing. And I don't have a problem with any of those things. We keep teaching, we keep playing, we keep organizing, we keep structuring and scaling and all those things. But at the end of the day, it is that life on life. You know, for example, this Friday I have five young couples that don't know me very well, who I've just invited over for dinner because I just wanted to... I just want to see where they're hurting in terms of marriage and family.

Yeah. So, Hey, let's talk about marriage and family because I want to help you in that particular area and I want to see you grow in your faith. Now part of that too is I'm also looking for future leaders. But you know, at the same time, the bottom line is that I got into people not for masses. I got into this business because I just love people.

Brandon Cox: I love that. It's almost like we should do this the way Jesus did it or something.

Mark Lee: Oh wow. What a thought. I mean...

Brandon Cox: Mark, man, I love learning from you and I want to watch Vantage Point a little bit more and just learn what I can from a distance across the mountains here, but how can people learn more about you or from you or from your church where... What's the best spot?

Mark Lee: One spot, to learn something from me?

Brandon Cox: Or two or three.

Mark Lee: Oh, okay. Well I don't have too many avenues so you can connect with me on social media. PastorMLee is where you usually can find me on various platforms. There's our church Facebook page and our church website vantagepointchurch.org or Vantage Point Church on social media and yeah, that's probably the easiest way.

Brandon Cox: Awesome, man. Thanks so much for being part of this podcast.

Mark Lee: Thanks for having me. Lot of fun.

Brandon Cox: Guys, we'll see you next time and thanks for listening in.

That's it for today. We hope you felt both encouraged and enlightened by today's episode. We want to thank you in advance for all you're going to do to lead a healthy, growing Purpose Driven Church. Until next time.