

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. They develop intentional strategies for leading healthy disciple-making churches. Our goal is simply to equip and encourage you on your own path towards growing a healthy purpose driven church.

Hey, welcome back to the podcast, everybody. I'm Brandon Cox, your host. This is where we get to tell stories of leaders from healthy churches and movements and just kind of learn a little bit about them and take some transferrable principles back home with us when we're done listening.

So I have with me today, Sean Sears from Grace Church in ... remind me of the city?

Sean Sears: Avon, Massachusetts.

Brandon Cox: Avon, Massachusetts. Right around Boston.

Sean Sears: Just south of.

Brandon Cox: Very cool. Thanks for being here, man.

Sean Sears: Yeah, thank you for having me.

Brandon Cox: Yeah, and I've been excited about Sean. I've known him for several hours now and his story amazes me. What I heard from him on the stage was really cool. Has a lot to share about church planting. I feel like we have a lot in common. You might feel like you have a lot in common with him as well by the end of this. So some really cool things I want to draw out, but first just let me ask. Sean, tell us a bit about your story, how you got from birth to where you are right now?

Sean Sears: You're talking about birth of our church, I'm assuming?

Brandon Cox: Sure. Yeah. Yeah.

Sean Sears: I don't think anybody would be interested in the other story. But I moved to Boston. I was raised in a preacher's kids home in the South, did most of my ministry experience as a youth pastor in Denver and ended up getting a degree in curriculum development so I could write youth ministry curriculum. My dream was to someday write for Group Publishing, do student ministry curriculum with some of the stuff that they were doing. And then a Bible college in Boston, asked me to come out and speak, do a one week long student ministries emphasis thing. And when we were out there, our host was driving us around and showing us the area. And one of the things that he pointed out was how few churches we saw in the area. And I came back to Denver and I just

couldn't forget about that. And then a year later he asked me to come out again to do the same thing and this time would I be interested in interviewing for a job.

Brandon Cox: Oh, wow.

Sean Sears: And it was something that my wife and I had been kind of kicking around, would we ever leave? And we felt that we were so comfortable where we were at that it didn't require much faith, which was the reason why we didn't feel like God wanted us to stay. One of the comments that we had made is I feel like we're on cruise control. I had students from my ministry and great jobs all around town. And when I say great jobs, I mean they worked at movie theaters, so they gave me free tickets. That's a great job, right?

Brandon Cox: Definitely.

Sean Sears: That kind of stuff. And then so when they offered me the job, the question was what's better than being a youth pastor of a hundred but to train a hundred guys to be the youth pastor of a hundred.

Brandon Cox: Oh, wow. Yeah.

Sean Sears: So for the sake of influence, if you can rescue one person or rescue a hundred people, how many people do you want to rescue? That kind of thing, or impact. So we moved to Denver to do that ... or excuse me, to Boston to teach at the college.

Brandon Cox: Awesome. Very cool. Yeah. And that was how many years ago?

Sean Sears: That was in '01, we moved there two weeks before 9/11. And I had some friends who had started a church in San Francisco that I had gone to college with and that was the first time that church planting had popped up on my radar. And I knew that all six states of New England were in the top 10 least religious. So the idea of church planting was something in the back of my mind for way down the road when I was mature, when I wasn't spending so much time online gaming and that kind of stuff.

Brandon Cox: Got you. Yeah.

Sean Sears: And way out. And my wife and I bought a house in the town we live in now called Stoughton. We had tried to buy a house in the city for the purpose of church planting, but we couldn't afford anything. Our budget was \$300,000 and this was in '05 ... or excuse me, that was in '02. And the only houses we could find under \$300,000 were crack houses and cat pee houses. And I've got a story about each that we won't go into.

So then in my mind when we decided to look for a house outside the city, that was God telling us that we weren't going to be church planters. So we bought a house that we could afford. And my wife wanted to be near a Walmart and I needed to be near Mexican food and the closest Boston had to it at the time was Taco Bell, so I'm not going to comment ... I mean that was it. We're lowering our standards big time. And the house we ended up buying, believe it or not, is equidistant between the only Walmart and Taco Bell south of Boston.

Brandon Cox: Wow.

Sean Sears: So that's proof that-

Brandon Cox: That's a God thing.

Sean Sears: I was just going to say, that's proof there's a God if you are wondering. And then I got involved in the community, not with any type of an agenda to pastor, but just because I think Christians ought to make a difference where they live. And for the first time in my life, none of my friends shared my faith. So I was a preacher's kid, raised in a Christian home, went to a Christian school, graduated from a Christian high school, went to a Christian college, graduated from Christian college, went to go work at a Christian Church, got my grad degree from a Christian university to work at a Christian college in Boston. My entire world was spent in the bubble, completely disconnected from all the people that my faith was intended to impact, to effect.

Then we moved into Avon and ... or excuse me, Stoughton, and I just got involved in coaching mainly in the school council and anything in town they needed done that I had time for my wife and I did. She was on the PTO and we started being known by people in the community. And the short of it, I think I've already taken too much time with this part of the story anyway.

Brandon Cox: That's all right.

Sean Sears: We became close friends with our neighbors across the street who were spiritually disconnected from God, good people, but just spiritually lost. And they had a friend attempt suicide and she told her friend, "You need God and my neighbor knows him, I'll be right back." So she came over to our house and said, told us the story about her friend and said, "Would you go tell her?" Now you don't have to be a church planter to do that, you just have to not be a jerk.

Brandon Cox: Right? Yeah.

Sean Sears: I mean, I would imagine even if you're an agnostic, if somebody said, "This person attempted suicide, will you tell him something about religion?" You would probably do that. But it was in that conversation at the hospital that our spiritually disconnected neighbor said to our friend, "You need to be in a Bible

study. If Sean and Billy Jane started a Bible study in their house, would you go to it?" And she said, "Yeah, if you and Glen will go." And she goes, "Okay, Sean."

My wife and I had been praying and fasting the weekend before that God would give us some type of a sign that we should start this church. Because there had been just other conversations, random things. I don't have time to go into now, but by Sunday night I hadn't had a word from God. So I was like, "Skip this." I ordered pizza. So in my mind, no answer from God was a "no" answer from God. Bunch of other stuff happened that week and this was kind of the culmination of it.

Brandon Cox: Wow.

Sean Sears: So we figure when spiritually disconnected people are starting our church for us in our living room without our permission, that's a sign from God. Right?

Brandon Cox: Yeah. That is awesome.

Sean Sears: Yeah. So we started that Bible study, still four months later because I was nervous and the most accidental church planter, I think. I didn't have a strategy, didn't have a prospectus, didn't have any coaching, didn't go through an assessment. I just had neighbors asking us to start a Bible study. I was scared to do it though, because I felt ... I don't know. If it didn't go well, these are my actual neighbors are going to see me every day after that. And if this, if they hate it, it's going to make things really weird on our street. Right? So I was just nervous.

Four months later we started the Bible study. They loved it. I just did Doug Fields 10 Creative Lessons on the Life of Jesus from the Book of John. I was a youth pastor, so I treated that like a youth group and they loved it and it grew. We launched, that was in February, March of '05, and then we launched with 35 people in September. Didn't launch large, it was too big for our living room. And so my wife said, "We've got to find somewhere else to meet." So it was a Holiday Inn.

Brandon Cox: Oh, that's sweet.

Sean Sears: Yeah. So that's how he got started, that's how we got off the ground.

Brandon Cox: Awesome. So these years later, what do you brag on the most about your church? If you look at Grace Church and said, "This is the thing I wish everybody could see and know about." What's your favorite thing about your church?

Sean Sears: That all of my neighbors, not all of them, but the actual number of our actual neighbors who've been saved and baptized at Grace Church.

Brandon Cox: Wow.

Sean Sears: So Glen and Tiffany, our neighbors across the street, saved and baptized at Grace Church. Jim and Mary live behind us, saved and baptized at Grace Church. Carlos and Michelle, caddy corner behind us, saved and baptized at Grace Church. He's one of our elders. Across the street, three doors down, Dave and Michelle Massarelli, saved and baptized at Grace Church.

Brandon Cox: Wow.

Sean Sears: Across the street next door, Savannah and one of her two grandsons saved baptize at Grace Church. I've got some neighbors that used to be atheist. Now they're agnostic. I'm going to call that a win for now. Right?

Brandon Cox: Yeah.

Sean Sears: And then my other neighbors had just started coming to Grace Church before they moved to Kansas city.

Brandon Cox: Oh, man.

Sean Sears: And then the new neighbors, I think are atheistic Jews, and they're surprised that we're so cool with them, even though they don't share any religion. So we'll see where that goes. My son's helped them with some yard work, but I think ... So that'd be the first thing, is our church has been built on the back of the friendships that our core team had with people who are far from God. So there wasn't a group of Christians that moved into the area. Only 3.6% of all of Massachusetts. Actually it's less than that. That's just the highest county. The highest, the most evangelical county in all of Massachusetts has 3.6% who attend an evangelical church.

Brandon Cox: Wow.

Sean Sears: That's the highest, that's Suffolk. Our County, it's 2.4%. So truthfully most of my friends still have not committed to faith and so we're not done. The other thing I would say, so number one, it'd be the number of actual locals who are part of our church. Two, I think would be other diversity. So our church is 35% black, 45% white, the rest is Latino with a small speckling or scattering of Southeast Asians. But it's an accurate reflection of our community. Glen and Tiffany, our neighbors across the street are black. So their friends that they are inviting from their social circle were also black.

So from the very beginning we've been bent toward the religious outsider. And when people walk in, it's one of the first thing that they say is that they've never seen a church this diverse before.

Brandon Cox: Yeah. What's really cool about that, about everything you've just said, is it's like religion can be divisive. Like your neighbors who feel like there should be hostility and there's not.

Sean Sears: Right.

Brandon Cox: But a traditional religious culture can create that kind of hostility. But what you're doing is just, it's just relationships. So with pastors who are listening, I've been a pastor 20 years, I know that for me sometimes it's hard to stay relational outside the walls of the church. What do you say to a pastor who struggles with that?

Sean Sears: I would ask whether or not he's involved anywhere outside of the church. I've told the church planters that I coach or mentor that one of the biggest threats to the mission of your church is when your church starts to get about a hundred people because now you have enough people in the church to keep you distracted from the mission of the church. Right?

Jesus said that the closer you get to him, he said, "If you follow me, I'll make you a fisher of men." The closer you get to Jesus, the more focus you put on those who are far from him. Right? And the more like Jesus you are, I would say the more of an emphasis you put on the people who are least like him. And then when you look at the life of Jesus in the gospels, you actually see that happening.

So, I think the end result of somebody's discipleship is a greater passion for evangelism. And I don't know ... I believe that they, most of the time they'll cross the line of faith in a corporate gathering, which I'm fine with. We are definitely a come and see evangelistic church. But when you look at the book of Acts, the overwhelming majority of all of those who came to faith in Jesus in those first 50 years were at come and see services where there was a preacher speaking to a gathered crowd. So there's absolutely nothing wrong with that. But those people showed up because of conversations that people had had who had already heard that sermon and told their friend, "You've got to come in here too." Crowds just don't gather out of nowhere. You know what I mean?

Brandon Cox: Yeah.

Sean Sears: So one of the things that, we were talking about this earlier, I think one of the things that pastors tend to do is we spend more time with the people who pay our paychecks than with the people who our paychecks were given to us to take care of, which are outside. Right?

Brandon Cox: Yeah.

Sean Sears: Where we need to be bent, which just means time. I think churches are programmed to death. I think that pastors shouldn't feel bad about leaving at 2:30 if they're coaching the local baseball team at three. You know what I mean? I was an assistant to the JV coach for soccer last year ... not the assistant JV coach, but I was the assistant to the JV coach for soccer. And that took a lot of my time. But honestly, some of those kids from that soccer team are actually

showing up at Grace Church now. I say that's well worth my time. You know what I mean? So I see that as part of the mission. So it's not just creating opportunities for the Christians who are already here to be developed in their faith, but it's creating relational context in the community with the people who actually need our faith.

So, I would tell pastors go to the same barber all the time. Don't make it a Christian barber. Don't shop at Christian stores all the time. Right? Don't patronize just the businesses of the people in your congregation, develop relationships with people outside of it. Volunteer to be a baseball coach, a basketball coach. Join Kiwanis, the rotary club. Get involved in the community beyond the high school council. Run for something as an independent. You don't want to be communicating that this is a Republican church and Democrats can't come to faith here or Democrats and Republicans can't come to faith here. So try to be as neutral on that as possible or don't if you feel that would be a barrier.

What I would just say to those pastors is that you need relational context outside. And truthfully it's everybody wants to talk about religion. I think atheists are obsessed with God. Right?

Brandon Cox:

Yeah.

Sean Sears:

It's just that nobody wants to talk about religion with somebody they're not friends with.

Brandon Cox:

Yeah. True.

Sean Sears:

So I think our job is to be the kind of friend that our non-religious friends would actually want to talk about God with.

Brandon Cox:

Yeah, that's good. That's very good. Be the go-to friend.

Sean Sears:

Yeah. But that's not going to happen if we are spending all of our time in a church office.

Brandon Cox:

True.

Sean Sears:

Right?

Brandon Cox:

Very true.

Sean Sears:

Yeah. So we, what you and I, this is what you and I had talked about earlier, we encourage all of our staff to actually have a side hustle outside of the church.

Brandon Cox:

Which is really a big shift for a lot of people if you're coming from a traditional standpoint.

Sean Sears: Yeah. And I come from a traditional church background myself, but when we started the church, a couple of friends had moved to help us out. And then one of the college kids who had helped to start the church was helping us out. And we couldn't afford any of these people, so they had other jobs. And when our church got large enough that we needed more of their time, I asked him, "How much would I have to pay you to get you to quit that other job so we can get more of your time?"

Then the question was, "Do I have to quit every part of the job or can I still work there in the mornings?" And so our discipleship pastor opens for LA Fitness every morning from five to nine, doesn't show up at Grace Church until 9:30, which is fine. Because now 20%, 25%, 30% of the first timers that show up on the weekend are like, "Oh, you're the guy from LA Fitness."

Why would I take away the one thing that made those first timers most comfortable when they walked in the first time?

Brandon Cox: Yeah, absolutely.

Sean Sears: You know what I mean? So I must still be a coach in town and when my kids get out of high school and I can't coach little kids because it looks creepy, I'll just become a patched ref. I'm going to stay involved in my community so that people know me from something other than our church so that when they come to our church I'm already a known commodity that they trust.

Brandon Cox: That's awesome. Let me shift gears a little bit. In the last 14, 15 years of ministry, what's been the biggest pain point or maybe a transition point that you've led to learn a lot from?

Sean Sears: I feel that we used to struggle with leadership and I can remember visiting different churches for the missions conferences or whatever and they bring me up on stage and say, "What's one thing that we can be praying for?"

They put the microphone in my hand and I would say, "Please pray that God would send us leaders." And I don't know exactly what I was thinking my mind. I think I was thinking that what God needed to send me were the kind of people who their very first time would start tithing right away. And in a low key way volunteer to serve in any way, capacity, shape or form and had ministry experience. And I don't know exactly what I even meant by that, I just knew I needed help. And I think the biggest ... so that was the pain point. Is that for us to help more people find and follow Jesus, find and then follow Jesus, I would have to include more leaders than myself.

I think it's a tough transition point for all pastors who start churches is that, especially if you start them small, is that once your church gets to be about 150, 200 people, you're not going to know everybody anymore. And you're either going to freak out about that and your church is going to stay small or you're



going to empower or raise up or find other leaders so that people aren't dependent on you for their spiritual maturity or mentorship anymore. Right?

And I think the shift that came as a result of that pain point was that I had somebody, to this day I can't remember who it was, who said, "Sean, your church is full of leaders. You have assistant managers, regional sales, district entrepreneurs, small business owners, operating room directors. You have leaders all over your church. They're everywhere. Unless everybody in your church is at an entry level position of their job, your church has a ton of leaders. You've just not done a good enough job identifying them and helping them to see that what they've been making a dollar for God gave them to make a difference with."

Brandon Cox: That's awesome. So another pastoral question out of that, how do you as a pastor sort of find them and what's the process of connecting with them, drawing them out into leadership?

Sean Sears: Yeah, that's the magic bullet. You write a book on that and I will buy it.

Brandon Cox: I got you.

Sean Sears: I don't know any other way but through personal relationship. When I find out that somebody is doing something in the world, that they have responsibility and I can ... I'll just ask, "So what, are you involved anywhere here at Grace Church?" I can ask that question because of the size of our church. If your church is a 150 people, you know whether or not they are.

I think the question then would be like, "How come you, you haven't gotten involved yet?" And they would just say, "I don't have the time." "Well, how many hours a month do you think you would have if you felt that this church could use your time wisely? How much time? Could you spare four hours a month?" Yeah. And they would say, "Yeah." So then now you just got a yes for four hours out of a high capacity leader. Now I think your job is to find something that they can do that you can let go of that isn't menial.

I think what helps us now though is a ... so an individual person for person, I don't know any other way to do this outside of individual conversations. I think systemically or if you're thinking about scalability and reproducible, what's reproducible and scalable. It's a healthy leadership pipeline. So every area of our ministry has an entry level position where anybody can jump in and serve regardless of their spiritual condition or leadership skills.

The people who seem to be passionate about the mission are devoted followers of Jesus and seem to ... What's the word? Proactively improve their area, we tap them on the shoulder and ask if they would be mentored as a team leader. So we have, as team, member team leader, ministry coach, ministry director, and then staff pastor position. So I can show you how a person would go from

parking lot attendant to actually be a lead pastor, a church planter, though our leadership pipeline.

And what I love is that each one of our ministry coaches, when they find somebody who's willing to help out actually have a 15 minute conversation with them on a weekend before or after a service, before they get involved, where we find out what they do in the real world and to ask them if there's anything that they're doing that they feel could apply. Sometimes they'll come up with great ideas. Other times we'll say, "Listen, because of what you're doing with this, I know you signed up for this area, would you be open to the idea of helping out in this other area?" So if we find out that they're really good at something else, we'll give them the opportunity to try volunteering that other area also.

So by just having an opportunity for people to have greater areas of responsibility within the area of ministry that they're already serving in, we give people a chance to self-identify as wanting to serve more at Grace Church and then we put leaders in a position or we authorize them to tap people on the shoulder to apprentice them. So every leader supposed to have an apprentice.

Brandon Cox: Yeah. That's awesome.

Sean Sears: That way no one ... and I have an apprentice. Right? It's the church planters that we're raising up. If I get hit by a bus next week, our church is going to keep going because, and if any ... no one person is your replacement.

Brandon Cox: Yeah. That's cool. So last big question. What do you see right now on the horizon that pastors need to be thinking about and aware of and diving more into? It could be a threat, could be an opportunity. What do you see that pastors should be thinking through today?

Sean Sears: I'm going to say the threat is the weakening position of the gospel in our country. Right? Because this is where we're at. So this isn't about American patriotism. Although as a private citizen, I think you ought to be a patriot in whatever country you live in. Right? So this isn't about that. And I'm not talking about the blending of politics and faith. What I'm talking about is the moral decay in our actual local communities that our churches seem to not be having an impact on at all.

I think the more we see that, the more of a tendency we have to focus on the people who are already coming and I think that's the threat, that we spend too much time with Christians and because of that we're only influencing the other people already in the boat and our poles aren't pointed toward the people who ain't in the boat yet. By poles, I mean our fishing poles. The moment Jesus puts you in his boat, he gives you a fishing pole. Right? And I don't think we have enough poles in the waters, is the point I'm trying to make. And I think we're waiting for seminarians to come to our church to ask us, "Can I start a church

out of your church? Can I help be a volunteer here?" And I think we ought to be saying ... I think the opportunity is that we need to be looking for opportunities to raise the next generation of pastors, church planters, missionaries, and leaders from within our own congregations.

Brandon Cox: That's awesome.

Sean Sears: And I think we ought to be thinking more by vocationally. Why can't a guy in our church named Moses, who has an engineering degree from MIT, which isn't too uncommon in Boston. Right? Why can't he have some type of a role as an executive pastor on our staff that doesn't make him give up his engineering? I couldn't afford him anyway.

Brandon Cox: Right.

Sean Sears: So what if we were able to carve out a way for him to lead without having to let go of his career? Because the truth is he knows more lost people than I do. Why would I take that away?

Brandon Cox: Yeah. Yeah.

Sean Sears: So I think that it's looking within our own congregations for the untapped leadership potential that's already there, not taking them out of the harvest field that God's already placed them in and then us ourselves being more externally focused.

Yeah. I don't know if that's the right answer to your question, but that's what I feel.

Brandon Cox: I love it.

Sean Sears: That needs to happen.

Brandon Cox: That's huge. Yeah. I especially think that encourages churches that are what we would consider small to medium size.

Sean Sears: Sure.

Brandon Cox: Who don't necessarily have a highly developed payroll system, it gives them some flexibility to grow.

Sean Sears: Yeah. You already, either God, either your church is the bride of Jesus or not and he'll actually take better care of his bride than you will. Right?

Brandon Cox: Yeah.

Sean Sears: So I think our job is to actually look at why our churches aren't growing? Why aren't we? I don't think you have to ask Jesus to grow the church. He said, "I'll build my church." Just like you don't have to ask Jesus to take saved people to heaven. He said he would. So if it's not happening in our local context, I believe that there are answers to that. There are very real barriers, obstacles toward it happening in your local context. And I think our job is to identify the barriers between those farthest from God, who live around us, and then finding and following him in our church family and then our job is ruthlessly eliminating those.

Brandon Cox: I love that. And then if people want to learn more from you or track you down or stalk you somehow online, whether church website or personal, what's the best spot they can go to learn more about you?

Sean Sears: Now, I'll give you my email address. It's fine. Sean@thatsgrace.org. S-E-A-N, that's grace, like this and that, thatsgrace.org. And if you're thinking about starting a church in the most spiritually broken and needy area, it really would be New England. As of 2018, all six states of New England are still the least religious states in the country and the top six least religious cities are all in New England.

Brandon Cox: Wow.

Sean Sears: And it's not because God loves everybody else in the country more than us. Right? Look at our sports teams. We are blessed. It's just that the people that God is calling, the churches in the area I think are struggling for existence. It's hard to think about reproduction and multiplication. And I think that there are people out there right now who might listen to this, who feel God's calling him, but it's too far. They don't know anybody and it's so expensive. And I think God can overcome all three of those reasons and not to come and help us start more churches.

Brandon Cox: Definitely. Definitely. Sean@thatsgrace.org. Awesome. Sean, thank you for being part of this podcast today.

Sean Sears: Dude, thanks for the invitation.

Brandon Cox: Yeah. Awesome. Thank you guys for listening and we'll catch you next time.

Brandon Cox: 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.