



THE LIVING SENT PODCAST: SHOW NOTES

EPISODE: **O35**

TITLE: **Interview: Interview: Neil Powell, Together for the City (The Dunkirk Spirit of Church Planting, Rethinking Collaboration, How Every Person Can Play A Part)**

Episode Summary

In this episode, we explore the urgent call for church planting and how the Dunkirk Spirit—a story of small boats rescuing thousands—parallels the collaborative efforts needed to transform our cities. Neil Powell, author of *Together for the City*, shares his insights on working across denominational lines, building movements, and empowering everyday Christians to get involved. Whether you're a church leader, a church member, or just curious about how God might use you, this episode is packed with practical wisdom and inspiration.

What You'll Learn in This Episode

- What the Dunkirk Spirit teaches us about church planting.
- Why collaboration across denominations and tribes is essential for citywide gospel movements.
- How to identify your "boat" and play your part in God's mission.
- Practical steps for launching or supporting a church planting movement.
- The power of theological vision and contextualizing the gospel for your city.

Key Takeaways

- *"Every boat that floats" matters*: Everyone has a role in church planting, whether you're leading, supporting, praying, or resourcing.
- *Unity over competition*: Collaboration between churches strengthens gospel witness and shows the world the unity of Christ's body.
- *Know your context*: Understanding your time and place is critical for effective church planting and outreach.

Resources Mentioned

- Neil Powell's Book: [Together for the City: How Collaborative Church Planting Leads to Citywide Movements](#)
- The London Project: thelondonproject.co.uk
- Redeemer City to City: citytocity.org



- Tim Keller's *Center Church* (Part 3 - Movements): [Center Church Book](#)

Discussion Questions for Teams, Church Staff, and Small Groups

Transcript

1. What is "Our Boat"?

- Based on the Dunkirk analogy, what resources, skills, or unique opportunities does our church have to contribute to church planting or gospel movements?
- What are we already doing, and where might we be falling short?

2. Who Needs to Hear the Gospel in Our City?

- Are there specific neighborhoods, demographics, or people groups in our area that lack access to a vibrant, gospel-centered church?
- How can we better understand and engage these groups?

3. Collaboration Challenges: Can We Work Together?

- What barriers might exist that prevent us from collaborating with other churches or networks in our city?
- How can we overcome theological, cultural, or practical differences to prioritize the gospel mission?

4. Are We Multiplication-Minded?

- Do we view our church as a "sending church" or more as a "gathering church"?
- What steps can we take to shift our mindset toward multiplying disciples, leaders, and churches?

5. Contextualization: Are We Reaching the People Around Us?

- How well do we understand the culture, values, and struggles of the people in our immediate community?
- What would it look like for us to more effectively reach them where they are?

6. What Does Kingdom Success Look Like?

- When we think about "success" in ministry, are we focused more on building our church or advancing God's kingdom?
- How can we realign our goals to prioritize kingdom work?



7. How Can We Start Today?

- What is one practical step we can take as a church, staff, or team to engage in church planting or gospel collaboration this month?
- Who do we need to connect with or learn from to move forward?

Assessments and Suggestions for Going Deeper

1. "Find Your Boat" Assessment

Purpose: Help your team identify their unique role in supporting church planting or collaborative gospel movements.

Instructions:

1. Reflection Questions (Individual):

Each staff member answers the following questions individually:

- What gifts, resources, or skills do I bring to the table (e.g., teaching, hospitality, organization, prayer, etc.)?
- How can these be leveraged to support church planting efforts in our city or denomination?
- Am I personally connected to church planters or movements that need encouragement or resources?
- Is our church actively supporting any collaborative efforts? If not, why?

2. Discussion (Team):

Gather the team to share responses. As a group, discuss:

- What resources (people, finances, facilities, or time) can our church uniquely provide to assist a church plant?
- Are there specific groups or communities in our area that need a new gospel-centered church?
- How can we encourage our congregation to participate in these efforts (e.g., through prayer, giving, volunteering)?

3. Action Plan:

- Identify **one or two specific steps** your church will take to support or initiate church planting (e.g., start praying weekly for a local plant, create a fund for supporting new churches, partner with a nearby church plant).
- Assign roles: Who will lead this effort?



2. Contextualization Exercise: "What Does the Gospel Look Like Here?"

Purpose: Help staff analyze their church's unique context and how they might better engage their community or support church planting with contextual sensitivity.

Instructions:

1. Map Your Context:

- Provide a map of your city or community and divide it into neighborhoods or districts.
- As a team, identify and label key characteristics of each area (e.g., demographics, common cultural values, economic challenges, social issues, etc.).

2. Answer the Key Questions:

For each area (or your primary ministry area), ask:

- **Who lives here?** What are the primary demographics?
- **What do they value?** What motivates their decisions and lifestyle?
- **What are their barriers to faith?** What cultural, emotional, or intellectual obstacles might prevent them from exploring Christianity?
- **What does it look like to be the church here?** If we planted or partnered with a church in this area, how should it look and feel?

3. Identify Gaps:

- Are there areas in your city that are underserved by gospel-centered churches?
- Are there groups of people (by age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc.) that aren't being reached effectively?

4. Collaborative Visioning:

Discuss: How can we collaborate with other churches or networks to address these gaps? What would a citywide effort look like?

Optional Discussion Prompts for Deeper Thinking

- How can we embrace the "Dunkirk Spirit" in our church?
- What cultural or theological differences might make collaboration with other churches challenging, and how can we overcome them?
- Are we more concerned with building our church or building the kingdom?
- If we shut down tomorrow, what would be missing in our community?



Transcript of the Interview with Neil Powell

Okay. Well, Neil, welcome to the Living Sent podcast. Thank you so much for being my guest today. An absolute honor. Thank you for the invitation and the opportunity.

Absolutely, absolutely. I think the majority of this podcast will be devoted to church planting and specifically be about your book called Together for the How Collaborative Church Planting Leads to Citywide Movements. But I wanted to start off our time by asking you this. You know, for many people, the idea of church planting sounds very daunting. Almost like something that's reserved for, you know, trained professionals.

Only clergy can do this. I would tend to think that you disagree with that. And so I wanted to ask you, at what point did you first say to yourself, you know, I think the Lord may be leading me toward church planting? What was that like for you? Thank you, Justin.

Well, there's the 30 second answer, the 10 minute. I'll try and get somewhere between the two because it's a big question. So I always, whenever I talk to people about church planting, say, I am an accidental and reluctant church planter. So I came to the city of Birmingham in England, which, for those who don't know, the UK is the UK's second city after London and the home of Land Rover, Jaguar cars, and Cadbury Chocolate, if those mean anything to you. And I had been working with InterVarsity, the equivalent of InterVarsity there, reaching out to college students, going onto campus, working with students to help them reach their friends for Christ.

So I was an evangelist in a way and I enjoyed that immensely. And we were seeing people come to faith, this is the mid-1990s, and we were not aware, within easy, say, walking distance because a lot of people don't have cars in the UK as college students within walking or cycling distance, we weren't aware of any what I would regard as outward focused, contemporary yet Bible centered church that they would feel comfortable and confident in their newfound faith to both be a part of because they could relate to it, because many of them came from quite secular backgrounds, but also that they would then think, oh, this is exactly where I want to bring my friends? Because of course, many of them come into faith on campus, none of their friends were believers. And they were amazing evangelists who just brought their friends under the sound of the gospel. So we were coming to the conclusion slowly but surely that maybe the only way that we might see that church in that place was if we started it ourselves.

But we had no formal training, we had no money. But we believe that if you open up God's



word and preach it faithfully and point people to Jesus and show them Christian route to discipleship that people will. There is an appetite and there's a hunger for God's word. And when people hear it, they're drawn towards it. Now we know, as the apostle Paul says, you know, to some with a smell of life and others the stench of death, of course.

But we had that conviction that God's word changes lives and that therefore, if all we felt we needed to do was find a building and faithfully teach God's word and go out to try and reach and invite people to come in and that they would come, and that is what we found. And God gave the growth. And I would say from beginning to end, we didn't much know what we were doing in terms of this magical thing of being a church planter. We were just trying to be faithful leaders of a local church that was only six people to begin with and to grow and to grow through conversion growth, to grow it through people moving into the city. The one thing we said was if you, if you're part of another church, we won't let you be part of our church until we've had a conversation with your pastor first.

Usually that conversation was an email. Wasn't. We wouldn't necessarily go. But we wanted those people to know we're not interested in taking moving Christians around the board. But we very much wanted to find.

Create a home for people of no faith coming to faith, disciples of Jesus looking for a church in the city. So there was no secret source. There was no magic formula. There was a conviction that God's word changes lives when it is faithfully taught and then carefully applied to our particular time and place. And people came and they brought their friends and God, God gave the growth.

And I look back now many years. 1999 was when we started. And I'm thankful to the Lord for what he chose to do. Yeah, well, I remember reading that actually in the book *Accidental and Reluctant Church Planter*. I love your.

Your honesty and transparency. There's. I would say now, though, as I read what you've written, I would say that you're also a passionate church planter. That's something that burns within you. And so I wanted to ask you, like, at what point do you think that started to develop within you?

At what point did you start to see, hey, maybe there's more here than meets the eye, and you saw your trajectory started to shift a little bit. Yeah. Thank you. I. I certainly was a natural evangelist.



I don't really mean like a street preacher, but I had come to faith at 18. And I was always very mindful that I would not have been a believer if a young adult hadn't knocked on my door in college and invited me to go with him to church. So I saw the place of an evangelist and I also saw the need for a faithful Bible teaching church, pointing people to Jesus and that that combination was what brought me to faith. And then obviously a church where life, the Christian life, was lived out in, in full and we built community and so on. And I just saw lots of gaps in the city of Birmingham where I thought, if the people in this community were ever to hear about Christ, how is it going to happen?

Because I don't see a faithful gospel centered church anywhere near where they live now. We have gone through secularization in the UK, so the gaps are everywhere in one sense, because 50, 70 years ago there would probably have been many more good churches and those had their times had come to an end and they closed and no one had started new ones. So there was just, so I want to say there will always be a need for church planting, in other words, the forming of new congregations for time evermore until the Lord Jesus returns. But Having gone through 40 years of secularization in the UK, the gaps were everywhere. And we also saw lots of new communities moving into the UK from around the world.

So the thought was again, how can they hear of Jesus in a language they understand and in a culturally sensitive and appropriate way if we are only going to do church, that is church for white Western post Christendom. We've got a lot of Iranians in our city, we've got Ethiopians in our city, we've got people from the world here. We will need many churches of many different cultures and ethnicities, even of languages to some degree, to meet the needs of a growing and ever changing city. So I, I just saw the need of constant innovation, partly to fill the gaps and partly to meet the new people that God was bringing into the city. Yeah, yeah, that's great.

Well, right, right out of the get go, you, you drew an analogy to something that I had heard about, I had seen a movie about, and I loved it because it really put things in perspective for me and I think it will for a lot of listeners who might be in the boat and saying, you know, I've never even considered my role in church planting. I've never even thought I might even be involved at all. I wanted to see if you could speak to what I'm referring to. You call it the Dunkirk spirit. And I wanted to see maybe for those who are unfamiliar with that, providing just kind of a brief synopsis of what that is and then drawing the parallel to church planting.

What was that? What are you getting at? And how does that relate to church planting and the call for collaboration? Thank you. Well, the Dunkirk spirit.

If you've not seen the film *Finest Hour*, that biopic of Churchill or the film *Dunkirk*, then I



encourage you to do that. That'll give you a sense of what happened in May 1940, when literally hundreds of thousands, over 300,000 British and allied troops were stranded on the beaches of Dunkirk. Haven't been pushed back by the advance of. Of the German army. They were almost, to a man, I think, in fear of losing their lives, that eventually the.

The German air force and then the military would arrive and there would essentially be the loss of many, many lives unless the British people could send, and other Allied forces could send boats to rescue these people who otherwise would perish. And Churchill himself estimated that if they could save 1 in 10 of those 330,000 British and allied troops on the beaches, that that would be some degree of success. He was hoping maybe 1 in 10 could. Could be rescued. But there was a matter of urgency.

Because the German military was advancing. The corps went out not just to those naval vessels, therefore, to come and go to the beaches of Dunkirk to, To rescue these soldiers, but really to anyone who had a seaworthy boat who could get to Dunkirk to go in their boat, whatever size it was, whatever condition it was in, as long as it was seaworthy, whatever its previous principal use had been. Go. We need every boat that floats to go, whether you can take 5 or 20 or 80 or 400. And many of those boats, of course, not only took that hazardous journey to Dunkirk once to collect passengers, but went across the English Open two or three times in order to.

To go again and again to rescue souls who would perish. So every boat that floats is what. What. What I began to sort of recognize, and in the same sense, if we, to use that metaphor, recognize that people are facing an eternity without Jesus Christ. They are without hope and without Christ in this world.

They are the equivalent, the spiritual equivalents of those Allied troops on the beaches of. Of Dunkirk. It's just a question of time before their lives come to an end and they face that lost eternity. So we need to get any boat, every boat that can float, every kind of church that is faithful to the Gospel to go to people. And that what it gave me was that sense of when, when I have eternity in my heart and mind, I start I worry a little bit less about whether they're Anglican or Presbyterian or which hymn book they use or their style of music, because every boat that floats, everyone who is capable of proclaiming Christ to a lost generation, we need them to go.

So my posture moved, I think, from suspicion, which I, I guess it previously had been my, my theology is Reformed Baptist suspicion of people from other denominations to a recognition that, that while I valued my heritage and while I valued my theology and I was, you know, a five point Calvinist and proud of it and would defend it to anyone who asked me, really what I was



interested in is anyone to plant a church that would actually help transfer people from hell to heaven. And I thought, well, if I can work with anyone, it should be those who share that same vision and that same heart. And it led to a more generous and radical posture towards working with church planters from across the spectrum because of that Dunkirk spirit of there is an urgent need and lives are in peril. So that to me seems like. And correct me if I'm wrong, please speak into this.

Seems like kind of the impetus for 2020 Birmingham. Yes. Is that the kind of spirit and the passion that that 2020 Birmingham still has and still wants to see? Yeah. So for those who, who might not be familiar with the name or what that it essentially means to say, I.

I planted with a couple of friends of Church in 1999 when we really had little idea what we were doing. We then started to meet representatives of what is now called Redeemer city to city. In those days it was the Redeemer Church Planting center in New York City. We. We met one or two folk at a conference in London and they were looking to help church planters in major European cities.

And a guy called Al said to me, could I come and visit. And he came on our fifth birthday as a church. I still remember it. He came for the cake. We had this great big cake for the church and Al was there and he said, look, would you like to meet with other church planters in the urban cities who are wrestling with the questions of how can we reach our cities for Christ?

And I had the chance then to visit New York to go and spend some time with some of the folk. Tim, Tim Keller was involved a little, but not really actually very much. He was there, but he was not by any means the sort of the one speaker. It was a whole bunch of practitioners talking about reaching cities and a vision for our cities. And what we came away with from a couple of those visits was a burden for the city that we really needed to think bigger than our local church or even our local community and to have a burden for the city as a whole.

In other words, to say, what would it take to see this city impacted for Christ? And rather than seeking therefore to just plant one church, which we did maybe eight years after we planted our own, you know, we were very happy to have done that and pleased to have planted a daughter church, we started to think we need to multiply. It needs a multiplication mindset rather than addition if we're going to reach a city in our lifetime. And so 2020 Birmingham was an initiative that began 10 years after we planted our first church. So it started in 2009 with a commitment to try to work to see 20 new churches started in 10 years between 2010 and 2020.

So in other words, what might we be able to do to try to. I don't want to make this sound too



grand, but birth a movement of multiplication of churches, churches that plant churches that plant churches from a whole variety of different networks and denominations, different ethnicities or gospel churches, but that we therefore might have a chance of, of reaching the city. So we thought maybe 20 was a stretch target for us. Could we help to see 20 new churches? And we by God's grace saw that achieved.

We were each of us busy planters, busy pastors, tithing a little bit of our time to help others get churches started, providing some training, some prayer, some gatherings where we could share, share with one another. And it seems, looking back now, quite, quite miraculous because many of these churches that we helped to plant in that 10 year window, we had no idea those churches would ever get planted. We had no idea who those leaders were. They kind of found us. God brought them to us, and we were honored to bless and to help them in their endeavors.

So I kind of want to ask you some hard questions about some of the things that you said about that. I think a couple times in this interview already you've mentioned that you're crossing and intentionally crossing denominational lines, theological lines, those sorts of things. So you've got, you've got multiple people from multiple different tribes, if you will. How do you navigate that? Like, what are some of the challenges that come along with that?

And how have you sought to bring some, like a collective spirit to that, despite those things? What does that look like on the ground? Thank you. Well, the, the British church has been humbled. I mentioned secularization, the steep decline of church attendance over two generations.

And I think it's evident to everyone that there is a great need and that therefore no one church, no one denomination can reach and impact the city. I. I might have a view and a vision for my neighborhood or local community, but once I start to think about the city, it seems enormous. So I think we saw a huge gospel need. And essentially what 2020 became was what we call both a centered and a bounded set.

So we wanted to have a boundary. It's not that anyone could be part of what we were trying to do as a collaborative and a movement. We said, no, the boundary is evangelical orthodoxy. We're not an ecumenical movement that would work with anyone. But nor were we a more narrow movement that, for example, was only open to Reformed believers.

Now, I believe there. There's a time and a place for gathering with groups with my own tribe and my own denomination, and even trying to hold our own events and conferences to multiply



churches. But for Birmingham, what we needed to do is to bring together people from across the spectrum. So the boundary was evangelical orthodoxy, the center, which, if you like, was the rallying point, or you might think of it as the. The flag that we put up, the pole that we invited people to look to and to come towards, could be summarized really in three said, do you have, as someone looking to plant a church in Birmingham, do you have a lively evangelical faith?

Secondly, do you believe that we need to see many more churches in this city, and you want to be part of the answer to that? And then thirdly, do you believe that we can do more together than we could do on our own? In other words, in that third part, that there was something about diversity that was good? Diversity isn't a threat. So to meet and relate to churches from.

From different theological perspectives might actually serve to strengthen me in my task of being a church planter. Now, with that boundary in place and that with that center set in place, we find people thought it was a safe place to come because they were only going to be relating people who shared the same view of the gospel, but that they were going to hear things that at times they may agree with a model of church planting or a theology, an ecclesiology or pneumatology in terms of how people understood the work and the presence of the Spirit in the local church and so on. That at times we were going to disagree. But those differences could be creative. I remember, for example, a number who were coming in from a Reformed context, but a Reformed charismatic context.

And I had never really hung out with those kind of guys before. But what was very striking is when they prayed and how they prayed. And I just thought, you are teaching us that we need. If we are to see a movement of the gospel in this city, we can only do it as. As God works.

And your conviction expressed through your prayers is powerful for me and helping change my attitude and why I pray and what I pray. So I. They didn't probably even realize they were teaching me that. We were just gathered together, looking at the city, praying around a map, thinking, how can we invite and encourage planters to come? But they were making a lasting impression upon me.

And I. I love the thought that my closest friend within this 2020 Birmingham network was someone from a very different theological persuasion of my own. I could never have thought that was ever going to happen. But it was a God thing and a beautiful thing. Yeah.

I remember in the book you mentioned a quote and I. Maybe it was John Wartburg's quote about kind of two ways to corral cattle in a field. He said, you can put a fence around them, he



said, or you can put. You can dig a well at the center of your property, and they will naturally gravitate towards that. I thought that was a great mental picture and.

Exactly. And that's what you're talking about in terms of bounded set and center set, Right? Yeah. So if you have a really strong center, perhaps you can stretch that boundary. You can have that to merge those two pictures.

You can have a deep well and then a very. And a very generous boundary. So my posture began to be, I am ready to work on earth with anyone who might expect to spend eternity in heaven. And why wouldn't I? So if I met a young.

Usually typically there were younger guys who were looking at planting a church. We weren't naive. We didn't rush into saying, oh, we want to help you. You know, we'd gather, a couple of us would go and have coffee with that person and just try and figure them out. Really.

Is this a good idea? Are you clear on the gospel? Have you got the character of godliness and the gifting? Have you got a plan that's credible? Have you?

You know, we. Because some of them were planting not out of a denomination where they were getting those kind of assessments. They were just coming to us saying, God has called me to plant a church. And if you particularly were working with the diaspora migrant leaders within the city, they weren't being sent into our city by a denomination. They.

They were sensing a call of God to meet, a need to start a house fellowship, to do something else. So sometimes you take us a little while to figure it out. But we were always going with a posture of we want, if we can, to help you to do this. But we're not going to encourage people who are not qualified either in character gifting or competence to start a church because you'll make a, you'll, you'll make a mess and damage people. But if we see those things, we want to help you in every way we can to get that going.

So for someone or maybe a church looking to initiate something like this, a collaborative church planting movement, or just be a part of it, maybe they don't think that they're going to start it, they just want to be a part of it. What practical next steps would you recommend they take to start that journey? Yeah, thanks, Justin. That, that's really good. I, I do recommend at some point seeking to speak to someone who's done it before.

So I'm very happy to talk to anyone out there who has a vision for this and, and wants a little bit of light coaching, in other words, to run a few ideas by me and, and ask me what, what, what



may help them. I'd encourage them certainly to read the book. Our book is really just a case study. We're just telling a story. It's not a manual, but it helps people to see.

How did two pastors in Birmingham from different denominations have a cup of coffee and start to dream a dream about impacting their city and where did it take them? That's really what the book is. It tells the story of what God did. And we didn't know what we were doing as we went along, but actually as things began to form, we were able to write it up because we hadn't seen it done before. And in fact, leaders in our city were saying, we've not really seen churches working generously like this.

This is curious. Why are you doing this and how can you do it and who can you work with and what makes it work? And how do you stay together and not fall out and so on. And I think in the book we try to, through the story to give some guidelines and some principles. But I think one of the key things given.

I can't say everything in this, in this single conversation is one of the key things is it depends. Movements depend upon the strength of relationships because you have no reason to be in them other than your own heart's desire to be a part of them. So usually we're part of a denomination or we're part of a network and we're in. And there's a, there's a sense in which being part of that denomination calls us to certain responsibilities and, and opportunities. But movements, well, you know, no one owns them in that sense.

It's just pastors, leaders, practitioners who want to come together because they love Jesus, they love their city and they think they can do more together than on their own. But to stay in the game because you could have a meeting and find a whole bunch of people say, I really like that sound of that idea. But what gives you the ability to keep going in it for five or 10 years, which is what we were giving to in Birmingham. And I think it was the depth of the relationship between leaders that just took a while to form. So we didn't know each other.

Jonathan Bell and I, who started 2020 Birmingham didn't even, we'd never even met before. We started to have a bit of a conversation, but we shared the DNA. So we shared the same view of where the boundaries should be. We shared the same view of what the center was about, but we needed to form relationship so we didn't rush it. And I would suggest getting going in a city is about saying, lord, would you put on my heart, one or two leaders in this city who might just share these same concerns and might just have that same spirit of generosity.

And I, and would you guide me towards them? And I will prayerfully meet and just say, look, I just wonder whether to reach our neighborhood, our community, our city, we might think,



could we do more together? And that for us was absolutely vital not to go big. So in other words, we didn't call a big, big event and try and gather 40 leaders and say we should be doing this for our city. We went really slow.

We went grassroots, we went one conversation and one relationship at a time, built high trust and then formed and shaped that vision together. And we did have our coach, we had Al who was based at the Redeemer Church planting center. We didn't have anything like center church. The book hadn't been written when we were starting to do it. But I'd encourage people to look for some resources on the Internet.

I can point you to a few. And then to go slow and at the go, at the speed of relationship for sure, because that's the trust you need. We gave ourselves a time frame and a number as well, quite intentionally. So when you start something, you don't often think, how long am I going to be asked to be part of this? So we gave it a 10 year commitment.

We said, look, we're going to try and work for 20 new churches in 10 years. And Jonathan Bell and I looked each other in the eye as the kind of the guys who were going to try and get it going and said, are we ready to go for 10 years? And we said, under God, hopefully, yes, we can, we can bear with one another for that length of time. And we, we said, let's put a number to it as well, because people will say, what are you trying to do? And we thought, okay, well, five churches sounds a bit too easy.

A hundred would be for us, crazy ambitious in 10 years, unless God wants to bring revival. So we thought 20 was what we called a stretch goal in that it wasn't obvious how we were going to get 20 new churches started, but it would, it'll spur us on and keep us going because it's still only two a year. It's still only trying to help two churches, plant daughter churches or two pioneers to come into the city and get something going. And so we, we had strong depth of relationship. We had a sense of how long we were in it.

We knew what we thought we could achieve under God. And then you just have to work out who's going to be doing what. So we were having monthly meetings with church planters to provide press support, training, a degree of encouragement and input as we told our stories around the room. So Jonathan Bell and I needed to know. And then we ran an annual conference once a year for anyone in the city.

This was after about three years, we started to run an annual conference as we were starting to get some traction and people were saying, oh, it's kind of curious what you're doing. We thought, well, let's make one Saturday a year in Birmingham for anyone who wants to come.



And we typically get about 40 church leaders pitch up for that because they were thinking, oh, yeah, yeah, this is, this is. I may not agree with everything, but I, I'm curious. So we needed to know what was the level of commitment required of busy pastors if they were going to start something like this as well.

So that's just a few, few thoughts to put out there. That's great. And there's more thinking now for sure, and there's more in writing. And the book was, was, was in a first attempt together for the city to give people something that, that could give them a framework to get going. Yeah, no, that's fantastic.

One of the things that really stuck out to me as I read your book was that you talked a lot about the importance of a local church's placement, its unique context. And one of the things that I thought was really powerful is that you had two sketches of two churches that were relatively close, but their context seemed very, very different. As I read the two sketches, and you answered this question, or you asked the question multiple times, you said, what does it look like to be the church here? Number one, and then number two at this time? And so I wanted to pick your brain a little bit on why is that such a critical question, number one, and then how does that inform our strategy for church planting?

Thank you. So Tim Keller caused that or called that question, or put it under the heading of what was called theological vision. So he said we as, as leaders often know what we believe. So, you know, we're going to conferences, we're reading books and our commentaries. We've been to seminary, what, you know, we've got to a theological understanding of what the church is and what the gospel is and what it means to be faithful to Christ as a local church and so on.

So we have what we believe, and then we probably have an idea of what we should do. So what are the ministries of the local church, whether it's the gathered congregation on a Sunday under the preaching of the Word or an evangelism program or discipleship culture or whatever else it might be. So we know what we believe, we know what to do sort of in terms of the basic structures of ministry in a gathered meeting. But he said there's always something else that's functioning that we're much less aware of, and it's like a pair of glasses through which we're viewing our context. So he says, there's what we believe, there's what we do.

But sitting between those two realities is how we see how we see. And what he means through that is the question that you've asked, which is, given what I believe, given my time and place, what that. What might that lead me to do in terms of my practices and postures and priorities as a local church? So it's not enough just to know what I believe and the kinds of activities that churches often do. I need this way of viewing my context that helps me to understand what



might work here in our time and in our place.

So an obvious example might be that historically, things like Billy Graham crusades seemed for a generation, maybe three generations are really, maybe more, maybe 200 years, maybe we go back to Wesley and Whitfield and and so on and say, actually there was a time when those big gatherings were hugely significant and many came to faith through them. But actually in the UK now, you never see them. We Very, very rarely see people putting on a big show like that because it's thought in a secular, post Christendom context. They're not an effective way to reach the next generation. And much more important seems to be community and actually doing life on life, showing people how the gospel makes a difference.

So people may be unsure about whether they believe the claims of Christianity, but what they can't deny is the power of a transformed life. And they want to know how your life has been transformed, and then you take them back to the gospel, of course. So people are asking different questions. Everyone in our communities has a way of seeing the church and their community. And if we are not navigating as skillfully as we can an understanding of who we are, who the people are, we're trying to reach what their questions and concerns are, what their idols of their hearts are, and how the church speaks into that community.

If we're not doing that work, we might well get it wrong in terms of how we go about our methodology. So as well as what we believe, which is crucial, it all begins there, that clarity around the gospel, what we believe and we understand, what it's right and proper for the local church to do between what we believe and what we do is how we see. And so it is about contextualization, culture and contextualization. It's a little bit bigger than that, I would want to suggest, but in its most simplest form, it is about those kind of questions and those kind of things. So as we met with different churches, planters in Birmingham for our monthly gathering, so 2020 Birmingham, one morning every month, anyone planting a church who respected the boundary and shared the center was welcome.

And we were wrestling with this question of theological vision. We were wrestling with the unique sense of what kind of a city was Birmingham. We were helping, speaking into each other's context, all on the south side of the city, it seems it's a little bit more like this in the north. It's, you know, there are different questions and different issues and the compare and contrast between different parts of the city, but the common language and understanding of our shared heritage of being in Birmingham, we are really helping each other sharpen our understanding of how can we therefore most effectively reach our communities. And again, the different theological perspectives.



The conservatives, charismatics, the. The African and Asian and historic white church leaders were just helping each other wrestle with this question by bringing their different insights and wisdom and perspectives. And so that's the value of gathering with people in your city, is you do a better job of that question of Knowing your time and place because you're in that place together. And some you can listen to a podcast from London. Where, New York or anywhere else, but they're not talking about your city, and they don't know your.

Your place and your context. Right. So for a. For a younger church, or especially a church plant that's just beginning, they might bring, like, more vitality to some of those kinds of questions. They might be a greater student of their culture than, say, a church that's been around for 80 to 100 years, maybe.

Maybe a church that's been established for that long wakes up one day and says, I don't think I know my community anymore. How would you help them to rediscover it? And how would you kind of coach them to begin noticing some of those things that you were just talking about? Well, I think a curiosity about what others are discovering in the city. So not to see new churches as a threat inherently.

Now, we know that some church plants are done badly. They're done badly in the sense that they're just trying to move Christians around and people are trying to build an empire, make a name for themselves. And where people are planting churches like that, I think, you know, that's deeply discouraging for established pastors and plant established pastors, because they think, is this new church just trying to take members of my congregation away and that sort of thing. And I hear that, and I understand that, and it's a concern to me, too. But where people are trying to plant churches to reach people who don't know Christ within particular communities.

And they've got a strong missional agenda, I think, seeking to learn, what are they doing? Why are they doing it? Is there anything that we can learn from this? So we were one of those churches. Okay.

So we started our church in 1999. We decided right from the beginning. One Sunday evening a month, we gather as a church in a function room in a local pub. So we're not going to meet in a school where we meet. We're going to the pub, which is a very British thing to do.

We're going to meet in a function room because we want a degree of privacy and we don't want to be too rowdy and noisy and so on. So we'll go to the function room upstairs, but there'll be a bar open. We'll bring in some pizzas, and we're just going to work through a



question or. Or an issue together. It might be an apologetic question, you know, about suffering.

I remember, where was God in 9, 11. The place, it was standing room only. We couldn't. We couldn't. We didn't have enough seats for everyone who wanted to hear what a Christian might say about that.

But we were just doing church outside the box. We were doing it in a new way. We were reaching way outside the fringes of the local church to some quite secular people. And one of the other church leaders just said, look, I'm on my sabbatical. I just want to come to a couple of these and figure out how it's working.

And he said, you think you can show me how we might do something similar in my established church? Maybe not quite as radical as what you're doing, but nevertheless, we want to reach outside to new generations and new communities. And basically they decided for them a pub wouldn't, you know, there were too many in the congregation for whom that would be too big a leap. But they found what they did do is they found a third space. So they said, like you were going outside of our building, and they put it in a community hall.

And again, they didn't think serving alcohol was quite what they. They would want to do. So they didn't have any alcohol, but they did bring in the pizza. And then they did track the kind of questions that we were tracking, and they just thought we need to be a little bit bolder in our reach. But they just watched what we were doing and contextualize it for their own congregation.

So I think I would say to people, as best as you're able to find out what others are doing and see to, and then maybe meet with that pastor for coffee and just ask them questions. Just be curious. You won't agree with everything they're saying. That's not the point. The point is to see what they're seeing and to try to learn from their insights.

Maybe they're 30 years younger than you and they just view the world differently, but can give you. Give you that as well. So a curiosity, a humility not to see those newer churches as a threat, a desire to be a change agent in your own context. Those might be ways in which. Which that could be done.

So our annual gathering of the 2020 Birmingham collective, what it did do was bring in those 40 pastors or so who were curious about what we were doing. And I think some of what you've just asked is what we were doing. We were telling stories about where we were planting



churches, where it was working, why it was working, where it wasn't working, why it wasn't working. And those established pastors were just slowly taking on board some of these things and sharpening their theological vision and having therefore, I think, renewed, renewed perspectives and a renewed energy to go again in their local communities. That's great.

I had a professor in graduate school who at the, I think it was the very first class that we, we were there for. He, he asked the question, he said, raise your hand if you are called to church planting. And I think at the, at the first class I think there were two people that raised their hand. And then the next class he asked again, and I think it was the same two people. And then the next class he asked again.

He asked that question every single class for the entire semester. And about maybe three quarters of the way through he tipped his hand and he just said, hey, look, I don't know if you've picked this up, he said, but I'm asking the same question every class. And he said, my goal by the end of our semester is for every hand to be raised. Not that every person believes they're called to be the quote unquote, lead church planter, but that every person would see themselves in some sort of capacity as being called to participate in this. How would you, how would you help an individual church member see themselves as starting to participate in or support some type of collaborative church initiative or movement in their city?

How would you help them kind of work through some of that in their, in their heart and in their mind? Yeah, I'd just like to say, just as we go into that question, just to mention one other thing we've not touched on, and I can do it very briefly, was when we talked about planting all kinds of churches and I talked about different denominations and different ethnicities and we were thinking about all sides of the city. The other thing I would say is we, we were looking for a, a wide variety of church planting models. So in other words, we were not just talking about pioneer church planting. I, when someone just goes in on their own or two or three people go and start something.

We looked at mother daughter church planting. We were looking at multi site. We were even talking about how you could plant a distinct congregation into the same building and therefore plant a church in your church. Now I'm going really quickly through these headers because there's challenges and questions about each of the models. We were looking at church revitalization and we were thinking of, of satellite congregations.

And just there seemed to me to be an infinite number of different ways start a new community of God's people to reach those who otherwise might not hear. Might not hear, obviously, microchurch is another one, and, and not so on and so on. So when we began to showcase



these different models, I think a lot of established church members were thinking, oh, okay, you can actually just decide to do something new in your own church building for a community who otherwise might not have a chance to hear of Jesus. So that might be welcoming in a migrant community to start an event or a service in your church building and not just hiring your building to them, but actually trying to enter into some kind of gospel partnership with them. So in other words, it's not just, okay, they want a 4:00 slot. Our building's free.

We won't charge them much, but we'll just open the door and let them, let them in and that's it. Right, which happens a ton in the UK. That happens everywhere now because there's so many of these new diaspora churches, churches are very willing to let them use the buildings. And I think, do you know these people? Are you praying for them?

Are you sharing food together so that this new community that's starting to meet in your building, you. You share a common meal with them as the established host church. And the answers were usually, oh, no, we don't, we don't. No, we just, they just rent it. Okay, well, look, that's a really, really easy, easy way to help a young church start get going, which is, we stand by you in this endeavor.

We probably can't come to your services. We won't understand what you're saying. We don't unless there can be some kind of translation thing. But we'd love to support your leaders, we'd love for your kids and our kids to maybe go on a joint weekend away together because the kids will all speak English, even if the host, even if, even if their parents are not very fluent and so on. So I think that's the very, very easiest way to do it.

Clearly, we can pray, we can choose to give. We might even set up in our. Sorry, by praying. We, we started as a church to pray for church planters in the city who are outside of our denomination. And a lot of people in the church sort of say that's a first.

I, you know, I've never thought that we would pray for Pentecostals who are planting churches in this city. And a lot of those members said, this really warms my heart because Jesus called us to be one. And he said, by this all people will know that you're my disciples because of the love you have for one another, the unity of the church, John 17, and so on and so on. And they were saying, this is what the church should be, shouldn't it? And I'm really enjoying the fact that we pray for other denominations in this city whilst really valuing our distinctives and celebrating who we are.

We're glad they're here too, in a way. Can you do both? I think you can. So praying for those church plants that are not even part of your network or denomination, obviously you can set up



a fund within the city to give some financial support to church planters. We just bought an Ethiopian church, a projector.

We as a church fund just spent a couple of thousand dollars, got. Projectors were more expensive then because they just didn't have anything like that. So it's okay, we'll buy a projector. How can we help you? So I think the key question is, is to discover where new things are happening and as a church community, to say, and what has God called you to do to that new community, that new little church that's starting?

What do you think God has called you to do? And then asking them, is there any way that we can help you in what God has called you to do? And if we start to offer ourselves in that way to the service of the gospel, all sorts of things will bubble up. So again, the Ethiopian church that needed a projector also said this. They said, look, it's a really weird request, but we as adults in this church speak Amarak, which is the.

The language, the Ethiopian language. Our children are really English speakers as a first language. So it's quite hard for our adults to lead their kids clubs and classes because they're all going really quickly in English to each other. And the adults aren't necessarily able to keep up with these conversations. They said, would you send some of your kids and youth team to run our groups for our Ethiopian kids?

Because what you have in common is you're all English speakers and we're not. For us, it's a struggle. It's a. It's a bigger challenge. So I think the numbers of ways in which we can be invested in what God is doing in our communities are considerable.

From praying to giving financially, to offering support. We know of one church that just sent two music group leaders to just help a new church down the road that just didn't have a guitarist every week. You know that there are ways and ways and ways in which we can help get going. But by forming this 2020 Birmingham thing, it gave a focal point to the needs of these church planters and we could quickly discover what they were when we were gathered on Wednesday and then send word out to established churches. Can you help with this?

Can anyone do this? Whatever else it might be? Yeah. That's fantastic. Well, I have a thousand other questions, but I want to respect your time.

And so I wanted to ask you this just as we wrap up. Was there something that you would have liked to talk about that maybe we didn't touch on in any of our questions?



Thank you, Justin. I would just like to say, because I do work with, with leaders in a number of cities, that I'm deeply encouraged by a change of posture and culture among churches to be more ready and willing to work in this way, I think. So right now we haven't had time to explain the. Right now I'm actually helping to lead a collaborative endeavor in London. So I've moved out of Birmingham after 20 plus years to come into a city of 9 million people to see if we could see something like that happen in London.

And what has been remarkable is the willingness of the church to embrace a very generous commitment to other churches within the city. And that I think wouldn't have even happened five or 10 years ago. So I think there's something new that God is doing in our communities. And then I talked to leaders in the States and Latin America and parts of Asia as well, and just sensing that although we're cautious about working outside of our tribe, that there's a greater willingness now than I think I've. I've experienced in my, what, nearly 40 years now as a Christian.

And I, I think this is a new day and a new opportunity. It doesn't make it easy. It's still all of the challenges of working with Christians who are quite different from you, but a kingdom mindset and a generosity of spirit and a concern that it doesn't matter who gets the glory as long as Christ gets the glory. And, and so, I mean, I am encouraged. I'm just beginning to see it, see it wherever I go in small ways.

And may Jesus name be honored and held high through the willingness of the church to display the unity of the gospel and to do more together than we could do on our own. Thank you. Yeah. Well, if someone wanted to find out more about what you're doing now, or if they wanted to maybe pursue some of the resources that you've talked about, where would they go? How would they.

How would they get in contact? Yeah, thank. Thanks, Justin. So the book is available in all good bookshops and online. It's called Together for the city.

And you'll, you'll find that. And that that would be a great place to sort of hear the story of what we did in Birmingham, because I think that idea feels within reach for a lot of communities. Oh, yeah, we could work together to see 10 new churches or 15 or 20, whatever it might be. And I think it, it's, it wasn't such a bold, outrageous project that many leaders would think we couldn't do that. So I definitely start there.

The third section of Tim Keller Center Church, which is all about movements, introduces some of the theological backing and framework for this. So Center Church, Part 3, read the whole



thing, though, of course, if you want to. I'd certainly encourage you to visit our website for the London project, which is what I lead at the present time, that is. Thelondonproject.co.uk thelondonproject.co.uk if, if you find Google taking you to a bar in Dubai, that's not us, that's another London project. So, and, and you'd be able to contact me through that.

And if you have a group of leaders where you are starting to say, we'd like to explore this and think about a movement in our city, then I'd be more than happy to try to link you with someone I know who's doing a similar work in your part of the world, or be quite happy to join you on Zoom, if I can be of any help to you. So you get me through the filling in the sort of contact form on the Londonproject.co.uk Excellent. Well, thank you so much again, Neil, for your time and for being on the Living Sent podcast. We really, really appreciate it. Thank you very much indeed, Justin.

I'd love to hear from you this week. Reach out to me at justinwester.com/connect. Remember, you don't *have* to Live SENT, you get to. See you next episode.