
A case study of the transformation of a local church from an institutional church towards a Church Planting Movement by Pastor Jimmy Tam.

Sunrise Christian Community was started in the year 2000 with 10 young adults as a local congregation in the conventional form of church organization in Alhambra, CA, less than 10 miles from downtown Los Angeles. From 2000 to 2014, we used the typical attractional method and programs to evangelize our community and to “grow” the church like most other churches in America. We had small groups, special evangelistic meetings, relational evangelism, community outreach events, seeker friendly Sunday service, etc. In fourteen years our church grew from 10 people to 50 people. Even though there are tens of thousands of non-believers in our community, with the attractional approach we had very minimal success in bringing people to the Lord, only 5-7 baptisms a year on average. As a result, most members found evangelism to be very difficult and only a handful of them have ever tasted the joy of leading people to Jesus... until recently.

In the beginning of 2015, our leaders decided to start a journey to transform our congregation from a conventional/institutional church towards a Church Planting Movement with the help of a coach and a trainer. In a 12-month period, we have experienced an amazing breakthrough in our congregation’s attitude, experience, and results in evangelism and making new disciples. Currently, we have 10 church-planting teams with at least 2 people per team. 30 members, 60% of our whole congregation, are now actively engaging in making disciples, starting seekers groups and planting house churches. So far we have started 7 house churches and 7 seeker groups, and have baptized 9 people in the last 6 months.

Our transformation journey started with our Senior Pastor, Jimmy. In August 2014, Jimmy met a church planter, Sean, from Israel who has seen multiplication of disciples and churches there with over 50 house churches among Palestinian Muslims and Israeli Jews. In that 3-day meeting, it was the first time that Jimmy learned about Church Planting

Movements (CPM) and he was very intrigued by the results that Sean has had in the last 7 years in Israel. Jimmy asked Sean a lot of questions about CPM and wondered whether or not it would work in his own American context. Sean not only explained the biblical foundation and practical principles of CPM, but more importantly, he also took Jimmy to the street and demonstrated to him how to effectively engage non-believers and find a person of peace through spiritual survey, praying for people's needs and healing, and telling Jesus' stories. Jimmy was shocked and amazed at how within just one hour on the street Sean was able to find a person of peace who would welcome him back for another visit to share more stories about Jesus. More importantly, Sean's method was simple and reproducible that every Christian can learn to do.

When Jimmy went back to the church, he immediately shared his new learning experience of CPM with the leadership team. The leadership team agreed to spend time in prayer together to seek the Lord on this matter. In December 2014 they invited Sean to do a half-day evangelism/CPM training to about 20 leaders and members. In the training, Sean taught on CPM principles and practices, did in-class demonstrations, and answered a lot of questions. After the training Jimmy identified a Pilot Group of about 8 people who saw the potential of CPM and were committed to try this new way of engaging people and finding persons of peace in their social networks and in the community.

Immediately, Jimmy started reading CPM books and actively engaged people in his neighborhood, in restaurants, and on the street in order to gain experience and model disciple making in his own life to others. As Jimmy shared his success and failed experience with the pilot group, the group got encouraged and each individual started actively trying different ways to engage people through spiritual survey, personal transformation testimony, praying for the sick and for people's needs, sharing Jesus' stories, going door to door, in front of grocery stores, in the park, in basketball courts, with waiters and waitresses in restaurants, etc. The group also met regularly to share and evaluate their experience.

More importantly, we often prayed for one another and for the harvest field.

After a few months of trial and error, we have found a number of effective strategies to engage non-believers and finding persons of peace door to door in a neighborhood. One strategy was doing contextualized 2-questions Spiritual Survey. This strategy can be used anywhere and at anytime. Another strategy was the "Love Our Neighbors" strategy. We used this strategy in our own neighborhoods going door to door sharing Jesus' love with neighbors. Jimmy first started using this strategy in his own neighborhood by taking his own family of five to engage his neighbors. They used prayer evangelism, "7 Stories of Love," and personal testimonies to share Jesus' love and to find persons and families of peace in the neighborhood. From our experience, we found low-income, working class, or new immigrants apartment buildings to be the most responsive places to do door-to-door disciple making and house church planting. We also identified places where people naturally gather to start seekers groups, e.g. McDonald's, basketball court, homes, etc, instead of asking people to come to the church building,

By June 2015, about six months since the pilot group began practicing CPM, the group's momentum and success stories had increased steadily each month. And we felt that it was time to expand this momentum to more people in the church in order to create a grass-root disciple making culture. This is a crucial step we took before making any major organizational change to transform the church from a traditional one towards a Church Planting Movement. We did the following things in order to create a grass-root disciple making culture and prepare the church slowly for a major change.

1. Rename and reshape the Sunday Service experience

a. One of the major obstacles to transitioning a traditional church towards a church planting movement is the conventional format and content of the Sunday “Church” experience. Most people in the tradition church see attending a Sunday Service with a worship team or choir, a professional clergy delivering a sermon, and a formal communion to be the essence of having a “real” church and being a committed Christian. If this definition of the church is not transformed, it would be almost impossible to see any major movement of church planting in/from a traditional church. However, such major change would not take place overnight. The first subtle but crucial step we took was to change how we describe our Sunday experience by changing the name of our Sunday experience from “Sunday Service” to “Sunday Celebration and Training.”

b. The reason we called it “Celebration” was that we wanted to shift the emphasis to our disciple making and church planting effort outside of the Sunday formal setting. In order to celebrate what God has done through us in sharing Jesus’ love with people outside, we added a testimony sharing time in the Sunday experience for our pilot group members to share their success stories of engaging and praying for non-believers, finding persons of peace, and starting seekers groups.

c. Similarly, we used the term “Training” in order to move the church toward an obedience-based learning experience. Our goal was to transform people’s Sunday’s experience from being a passive audience to learning to be obedient disciples and active disciple makers. Instead of using the name “sermon series” we renamed the Sunday teaching “training series.” Each Sunday Jimmy would assign or ask members to come up with concrete action items at the end of the teaching time. In addition, we made the last Sunday of every series to be an interactive training experience. For example, in the “Great Commission” training series, every attendee had to practice sharing a 1-2 minutes personal transformation testimony with another person.

d. Over a period of four to six months, the whole church was taught and trained in the basic practices of multiplying disciples and churches. And as more members started stepping out to practice what they learned on Sunday with non-believers during the week, we are now having one or more disciple making testimonies every Sunday and a grass-root disciple making culture is emerging gradually.

2. Pray for the community and the harvest with leaders, the pilot group, and the whole church

a. We used every opportunity we had when we gathered together as a church, in leadership meeting, and in the pilot group to pray for the harvest and a breakthrough in evangelism.

b. After hearing people's disciple making testimonies during our Sunday Celebration, we had the whole church spend a few minutes to pray for our team and the non-believers we reached.

3. Model leadership transformation and facilitate CPM leadership development

a. Jimmy continued to model disciple making and church planting in his own life.

b. We changed the weekly pastoral staff meeting format and content to focus more sharing experience and developing accountability on disciple making efforts than on administrative tasks.

c. We spent a lot of time to talk about disciple making and church planting principles and strategies and share stories and progress in the leadership team meeting.

d. We invited a local CPM trainer to do basic disciple making training and have the pilot group invite more people to come.

e. The pilot group started taking people to the community to make disciples and developed their own grass-root church planting teams.

- f. We divided the pilot group into smaller coaching groups to encourage, challenge, and support one another.
- g. We consulted our CPM coach, Sean, on a regular basis.
- h. We invited Sean to do a half-day leadership training for our leadership team.

4. Add multi-media support to develop a CPM mindset

- a. We created short video skits to promote CPM principles and the simple church multiplication paradigm.
- b. We added CPM concepts into the Sunday bulletin.
- c. We created one-liners like “We should bring Jesus to people’s families instead of bringing people to the church building,” and promoted them through short video skits and in the Sunday bulletin.

5. Teach on lay baptism and encourage baptism parties at homes

- a. We taught our members that the Great Commission was given to every disciple of Jesus. Therefore, every Christian should obey the command to baptize others.
- b. We encouraged and trained new disciples to host baptism parties at their own homes to invite family and friends over to celebrate their baptism. Our team and the new believer would do prayer ministry on the spot right after the baptism. We gave a subsidy for the expense of each baptism party as an encouragement to the new disciple.
- c. We had lay people, sometimes more than one person, baptize those they led to the Lord.

6. Let people observe and participate at their own pace

- a. Whether with the leadership team or members of the church, we didn’t pressure anyone to participate in making disciples nor did we make them feel guilty if they were not yet ready to change. We just modelled a disciple making passion and lifestyle in our own lives and

find ways to share our new excitement and experience with the church.

We demonstrated patience and love, and we prayed a lot.
