

The Apex Story

by Joe Boyd

The Early Days

The formation of the Apex Community began in a small group of twelve young adults. For nearly fourteen months, this core group met together to lay the foundation of the new church. By September 1997 the core group had grown from just a few to over fifty people who were committed to starting a church that would reach their lost friends with the gospel of Christ.

Apex met as a church body for the first time on September 28, 1997 in the cafeteria of a middle school in northwest Las Vegas. Months of planning had gone into that first church service. We had been praying for two hundred people to attend the first service, and we just barely missed our goal. Over one hundred and ninety came with the excitement that can only accompany the birth of a brand new church.

“We’ll get two hundred people next week,” I said with a naïve confidence as I closed the door of Lied Middle School behind me. We didn’t. We actually lost about twenty people each week for the rest of the year, until we had “grown” our church from 193 people to an anemic gathering of less than 60 souls in just three months - not exactly the kind of growth that people write books about.

That infamous week was our emotional and spiritual basement. We couldn’t get much lower. We had managed to lose virtually every person except the fifty who started the church, and by this time most of them were burning out and fighting amongst themselves. Something had to give. I drove home alone that December evening, with tears in my eyes. I punched the steering wheel of my car and cursed God for forsaking me. Why would He let me fail? Why was He so bent on embarrassing me? What had I done to deserve this? It was that night that I realized how much of “me” was invested into that little church. It was that night that I was forced to make a choice. It was going to be me and my shaky foundation of dreams and insecurities or it was going to be God.

The Movement from Programming to Community

I will never forget that first Sunday in January of 1998. Just seven days after my bout with God, I sat on a stool in front of my little congregation. I told them that I was done pretending. “We can’t do this anymore,” I resigned. Somewhere along the way we had sacrificed the reality of the Kingdom of God for electronic drums that never quite sounded right and Power Point presentations that never quite looked right. We had sold a life of love and grace for a mediocre presentation of an empty gospel. And the worst part was that every member of the church knew it, even before I did.

Looking back on that seemingly normal Sunday in January, two breakthroughs occurred that dramatically, though slowly at first, changed the direction of the entire ministry. The first was a vow that I made during the introduction of my message that night. I promised on behalf of all the leaders of the church that we would no longer focus on programs and events that separate real people from the love of God in the name of “church.” It was time to covenant into true community. It was time to quit doing church and start being the church.

It was going to take an entire conversion of heart and mind to truly build a Christian community from a crowd of strangers. We would have to surrender our individual egos and agendas to self-sacrificial love. We would have to invest the time into learning each other's names and stories, fears and dreams. We had to figure out a way to live life together. And ever so slowly, through time and prayer, we did eventually become a true community of God-followers.

It was after church that same Sunday meeting in January of 1998 that a 29-year-old local businessman named Jim approached me. Jim and his family had been coming to Apex since the first week, but remained virtually unnoticed. I knew him by name only. He had been praying for the church and for me since the first week. His question that night cut to my heart.

"Is there a group of people who pray for you?" he asked.

My instinctive thought was, "Prayer? We don't have time for that yet. Maybe someday, but we are trying to start a church here."

My simple response was, "No, not really."

After a few minutes of conversation, I asked Jim if he would be willing to start a group to pray for the church. He rather sheepishly agreed. After seeing that Jim wasn't very interested in a leadership position in the church, I did what any sensitive pastor would do. I invited this man, whom I really did not know at all, to join three other key leaders and myself on a planning retreat regarding the future of the church.

That very week, the five of us locked ourselves in a motel room about forty-five miles west of Las Vegas. I came up with an agenda for our two days together. I had taken the time to sketch out about five different action plans or scenarios to "pull Apex out of its slump." Once we were situated in the room, I passed out my agenda and began to lead a discussion. Jim interrupted.

"Shouldn't we pray first?"

I could see the other leaders looking at me. I knew exactly what they were thinking, "Who invited the religious guy to the church board meeting?"

But we prayed. As a matter of fact, we didn't stop praying for two days. We confessed sin. We pleaded with God to save our church. We prayed for church members by name. Jim even received a "vision" of what our church could be someday by God's grace. More amazing than that, the rest of us actually believed him.

After three months of leading a church without God's help, we ran into His arms and pleaded for His help. And, to His glory, He has proven faithful ever since.

The Movement from Seeker Sensitive to Seeking Together

The dream of Apex was always about reaching those who were far from God with the life-changing, revolutionary love of Christ. It had always been about living the Kingdom

of God with the least of these. At its core, Apex was birthed to save the lost and to be salt and light in a city built on illusion and sin. That never changed. And it never will. Apex will always be a church for those who are far from God.

What has changed is the way we reach lost people.

We slowly realized that being sensitive to seekers and post-modern pagans really boiled down to a few simple ideas:

1. Speak into their culture, but be counter-cultural.

The only subject matter that a Christian should be more familiar with than the pagan culture where they live is the Gospel itself. The timeless and unchanging Gospel always falls into an ever-changing culture. Every disciple is called to be a missionary in his or her culture. However, we do not preach culture, we preach Christ. Culture is the language, Christ is the Truth.

2. Be completely open. Don't hold back anything from them.

Post-moderns don't want to be eased into faith. They want to be surrounded by it. They want to see the guts of the whole operation. They don't want to be ushered from the baptistery to the secret room where all the mysteries and theological debates are stored – they want to go through that room on the way to the baptistery. They want to taste Christ in the bread and wine. They want to witness authentic worship. They want the Bible to be, at times, complicated and paradoxical. After all, every other worthwhile truth in the world is.

3. Be consistent in practice and philosophy.

Post-moderns are always asking if the person pushing the product actually uses it. They want to know if those preaching Christ are actually living Christ; if they doubt, if they sin, if they hurt. I used to pretend that I had no doubts or questions; after all, I reasoned, I was the preacher! Who wants a preacher who sometimes doubts his own faith? Post-moderns do. They want to know that their leaders are swimming in the same cesspool of depravity as they are. They want to watch those ahead of them progress and become more like Christ.

The Movement from Addition Growth to Multiplication Growth

Find an average run-of-the-mill foreign missionary (if one exists) and ask him or her what the church looks like when it is really growing. Most missionaries will eventually begin talking about a church planting movement. Today the church is multiplying at a chaotic, innumerable rate in many regions of Africa and Asia. Most of these cultures have stumbled into their form of church planting because of unfathomable levels of persecution. The church simply jumps from house to house as the persecution increases. Many converts in places like China are told on the day of their conversion that they should begin preparing to plant their own church.

The church is dying in America; therefore, the slightest hint of a growing church is highly celebrated in Christian circles. These churches are often adding 10-30% each year to their weekend attendance. However, a high level of celebration over this sort of

“addition” growth may be dangerous if it does not ultimately lead to a “multiplication” way of growing, or what our missionary friend might call a “church planting movement.”

As I stated earlier, prayer became central to our church in the months following our decline. We stabilized in the winter of 1998 and actually began to grow in numbers on and around Easter of that year. In our context, the rapid “addition” growth of Apex over the last two years (nearly 1,000% growth since our lowest mark) has brought with it many challenges, not the least of which has been an unspoken level of contentment about being a “growing” church. As we grew, excitement and energy increased, but once again, the value of community began to decrease. On a practical front, it became impossible to truly be a genuine community of 200, 300 or 500 people. Some people started to long for the “good old days” when everyone knew the name and story of the person sitting beside them at church.

Once again, something had to change. This time, however, the change was needed to somehow maintain the growth of our church. For years, we had flirted with small group ministries, lay shepherding systems, and involvement programs.

The problem was an educational one. Our people thought that church was something to “attend.” It isn’t. Church is something you are, or it is nothing at all. Remember why Jesus came? To launch and lead...a Kingdom – not a meeting, not a service, not a program, not a system – but a Kingdom- a living, breathing community of King-followers. The disciple of Jesus doesn’t “go” to church. He never “leaves” church. He is never “late” for church. He cannot “skip” church or forget church. He is the church! This understanding completely transformed the way we viewed Apex. Apex is now a “community of communities” or a “church of churches”. Every member of Apex is also a member of a House Church. House Churches are holistic Christian communities of 20-70 people who live life together. Every House Church is expected to start (plant) a new House Church no later than two years from its inception. This is the most organic way to grow the church in any city or culture.

Praying for the Chaos of God

And so that is our story. We are simply a collection of movements: from a gathering of strangers to a small church, from a small church to a larger church, from a larger church to a collection of small churches. I would not trade our story for anything. I love to tell the story of Apex because it is God’s story. Jesus said that the Spirit-wind blows where he chooses to blow. He has, thank God, chosen to blow on us. We continue to pray, but these days we are praying more and more for the holy chaos of revival And we never stop praying that His Kingdom come, His will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

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