

Meet the Planter: Kevin Sullivan

Ask people what is behind the success of High Pointe Community Church and after acknowledging that God is, they will quickly point to Kevin Sullivan. Kevin is an enthusiastic leader with a winning personality that attracts people and keeps them coming back. He is a good communicator, but perhaps more significantly, people want him to do well when he is preaching. You can hear the loyalty people have for him in interviews, and you can see people pulling for him as he delivers his message. In short, people like Kevin, and it does not take a lot of time with him to understand why. He is a genuinely likeable person with an endearing, high-octane personality. With that in mind, his background surprises people. He was not a salesman, self-help speaker, or game show host prior to entering the ministry. He was, of all things, an accountant. His journey from “account-hood” to church planter/pastor is worth reviewing.

Kevin was born in Lexington, Virginia in 1963, but he grew up in Houston, Texas. While he is “all Washington” now, stories from his life in Houston still populate his sermons. For example, the day we visited worship he shared how his pride gave him a painful ride on a mechanical bull at Gilly’s, the Houston bar made famous in the movie *The Urban Cowboy*. While he has many a humorous story from Houston, it was a painful and defining event that originally took his family from Virginia to the Lone Star State. Kevin’s dad died when he was only nine, forcing the family to move and leaving him extremely bitter at God. For years, he remained angry, until the Lord graciously saved him during his freshmen year in college.

After graduating from Texas A & M and going to work as an auditor, he married Nancy Kopfer. They now have two daughters, Lauren, born in 1988, and Audrey, born in

1991. Kevin worked as a senior auditor and later as an assistant controller in Houston until God redirected his life in 1991. After much prayerful deliberation, Kevin gave up his secular accounting career to join the Second Baptist Church of Houston staff as their controller. Shortly thereafter, in 1993, he abandoned accounting altogether to lead young married adults as Second Baptist's Married-Life Pastor and to attend seminary.

Kevin graduated Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary with a Masters of Divinity in 1996. The Lord blessed his ministry at Second Baptist mightily, raising him up to speak to thousands at marriage conferences and retreats, as well as, on radio and television programs. He still has a passion to help equip people for healthy dating and marriage. In fact, so much so that it almost set his ministry back a bit in the beginning of the Highpointe Community Church plant. Surveys had revealed that the people were most interested in learning about raising their children. In spite of this, Kevin began to prepare and promote marriage seminars. A consultant reviewed their plans, and confronted Kevin, calling him to address the people's felt needs rather than showcase his expertise. To his credit, he listened, and called in people to help with child development seminars. The church continues to place an exceptional emphasis on children's ministry to the delight of the community.

It was in June of 1999 that Kevin, Nancy, Lauren, and Audrey moved to South Hill, WA to plant Highpointe Community Church, and their lives have been moving at light speed ever since. The church has grown very rapidly under Kevin's leadership, and it could very easily pull him away from his family. Kevin guards against this. He wisely makes a point to set aside one day a week of rest from work. He also appears to make time for his family, and seems to have their full support.

As for his preaching style, Kevin typically preaches topical series and uses fill in the blank note sheets. When we visited, he was working his way through a series on community. The topical messages are biblically sound, but they are not verse by verse exposition from an appropriate text. He told us that he usually preaches topical series that are several weeks in length, but that he really enjoys preaching through books of the bible. He has preached through the book of James recently, and he was contemplating preaching through the book of Philippians at the conclusion of his community series. He also makes a point to work the gospel into each message. The week we visited he inserted the “Romans Road” into the middle of his message. This was somewhat forced and awkward but true to his conviction that he needs to share the gospel every time he preaches. One thing Kevin does an excellent job at is connecting with the unchurched. He makes people who are unfamiliar with the bible very comfortable by directing them every step of the way during his message without appearing condescending or insulting. Part of this skill comes from following the lead of Rick Warren and Bill Hybels.

Highpointe very closely follows the Purpose Driven model, and Kevin has obviously studied Bill Hybels’ work to develop his seeker sensitivity. Kevin has also been greatly influenced by his former pastor Ed Young, particularly by his dedication to evangelism. It was a bit surprising to see that James Montgomery Boice was also a significant influence on Kevin, at least judging by his library, which was packed with Boice commentaries. In spite of this, Kevin said that he does not emphasize doctrine in the church or dive deep into theology beyond a personal level. This is not surprising in light of Kevin’s commitment to reach the unchurched. In sum, Kevin appears to be exercising godly wisdom, as the Lord uses him to build a church of new Christians.

Meet the People

Highpointe Community Church is located in Pierce County, Washington.

With an increase of 19.6%, Pierce County is in the top fourth of all counties nationwide in its rate of population growth over the past ten years. Compared to King County (home of downtown Seattle and much of the state's population), Pierce County enjoyed a 7,706 increase in net domestic migration from 1998 to 1999 compared to King County's decline of over 9,000. We suspect King's decrease is due to the increasing cost of living closer to Seattle and the lure of a suburban lifestyle. Pierce County is no doubt gaining some people from this urban exodus. Gains in Pierce probably also stem from those exiting California. Conversely, the gain in international migration in Pierce County lagged that of King County by over 8,000 during this time period.

Highpointe ministers to the 31,623 people of South Hill – a borough of Puyallup located just 30 miles from Mount Rainier. Much of Pierce County has become an expanding bedroom community for families with wage earners working in Seattle but desirous of the suburban lifestyle. This statement finds support in a comparison of 1990 and 2000 census numbers. The borough of South Hill grew from 12,963 people in 1990 to 31,623 in 2000. An increase of over 143 percent in ten years is phenomenal and has caused city planners to scramble to keep up with its need for new schools. The average income in South Hill was a moderate to low \$41,769 in 1990. We are interested in a comparison of the 1990 income figures to the yet to be released 2000 numbers.

There are 55 churches within a 5-mile radius of Highpointe with the following denominational breaks:

Apostolic (1), Assemblies of God (1), Baptist (9), Catholic (1), Christian (2), Church of Christ (2), Church of God (1), Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (4), Church of the Nazarene(1), Community (1), Covenant (1), Evangelical (1), Full Gospel (2), Independent (1) Interdenominational (4), Jehovah Witness (2), Lutheran (5), Methodist (2), Non Denominational (5), Open Bible (2), Pentecostal (3), Presbyterian (2), Seventh Day Adventist (1).¹

Without the benefit of a professional demographics profile, we made some basic assumptions with regard to a cultural exegesis. Observing the cost of start-up homes in the area (150-200K) leads us to conjecture that South Hill is made up predominately of white-collar yuppies with blue collar homesteaders in the minority. The increase in population has caused an increase in retail sales establishments in what appear to be newly renovated strip malls. Stores and restaurants in the area include Ruby Tuesday's, B'Dalton Booksellers, and a host of up-scale sporting goods and apparel outlets as well as fast-food restaurants.

Historical Overview

With a general profile of the pastor and community in view, let's examine the historical progression of Highpointe gained from our interviews with Kevin Sullivan and key staff and laypersons. We will conduct this review through the framework of the contemporary church-planting model used in many Purpose Driven™ church plants.

Preconception Phase

The preconception phase deals with the biblical, theological, spiritual and missiological issues that a planter draws upon for the ministry of planting a new church.

¹ www.superpages.com

This phase also covers personal preparation of the planter and his support network. This section will only cover planer and support preparation since theological and missiological issues get mention in the planter's profile.

Kevin and his wife Nancy toured the Puget Sound area for approximately a week, finding little success in determining a location to plant the new church. Kevin told us that up to six or so hours before their plane back to Houston was to depart, they had not decided on a location. Kevin's dilemma was a struggle between his desire to plant a church in "Seattle" versus what appeared to be the preponderance of wisdom in starting a church in South Hill. Kevin shared that Proverbs Chapter Two guided the couple in making their decision just hours before returning to Houston.

My son, if you will receive my words And treasure my commandments within you, Make your ear attentive to wisdom, Incline your heart to understanding; For if you cry for discernment, Lift your voice for understanding; If you seek her as silver And search for her as for hidden treasures; Then you will discern the fear of the LORD And discover the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge and understanding. He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; He is a shield to those who walk in integrity, Guarding the paths of justice, And He preserves the way of His godly ones. (Proverb 2:1-8).²

They decided to go with South Hill's promising demographics and possibilities for future growth. The couple then only had hours to find a house in the area. They called a realtor and told her that they had six hours to find a place and the one requirement was that the house must have a large living room. The realtor found the Sullivan's a home in a new development very close to their current meeting place in time for their flight home. A side note to this discussion is that, from a personal view, this thirty-something couple with two beautiful children, along with Kevin's professional background, are a perfect fit for the mostly upper-middle class families of South Hill. In reading Feeney's *Church*

Planting by the Team Method, we discovered additional helpful direction for gaining wisdom in the selection of areas for new churches. This section of Feeney's work draws wisdom from Jack Redford, Timothy Starr, and Ebbie Smith. Smith raises two concerns in determining viable locations that are worthy of comparison to the selection of South Hill.³ First, Smith advises those desiring to plant new churches to look beyond the mere presence of a large populace. He says the planter should look at responsive areas in determining the best locations.⁴ This is something that Kevin would have had little information on which to base his opinions. For Kevin, going with the facts on population growth worked in finding a great location. By the number of people attending, we can see that the area is responsive as well. Smith also encourages planters to consider regional needs when selecting an area.⁵ The Puyallup/Pierce County region is lagging in the number of evangelical churches and there are even fewer with contemporary worship and seeker sensitivity.

Kevin's background in accounting made him sensitive to the financial requirements for planting a church for the unchurched. His planning led him to establish a three-year strategy for Highpointe with an estimated budget of 350,000 dollars. Kevin was able to raise this substantial sum before arriving on the field from the various contacts made while serving as the Married-Life minister at Second Baptist Houston.

² NASB.

³James H. Feeney, *Church Planting by the Team Method*, (Anchorage: Abbott Loop Christian Center, 1988), 88.

⁴Ibid.,88.

⁵Ibid., 88.

Core Development Phase

Highpointe found a willing mother church in the First Baptist Church of Lakewood (a Tacoma suburb church located approx. 20 minutes from Highpointe). Kevin and Nancy began their core group formation through contacts made in local churches and in the community. Though advised that door-to-door work was not the way to go, Kevin and Nancy used this method with success. Kevin thought that taking Nancy along with him gave the couple more credibility. They offered each home a sampler size of a favorite coffee as a free gift. Kevin went out of his way to meet all of his neighbors personally. Before long, the church had the beginnings of a core group. Kevin and members of his core were successful in inviting interested people from the community to monthly events in the Sullivan home called “The Gathering”. Nancy took the children in attendance to a local community center for fun activities allowing more effective ministry to the adults. Small groups formed as well and were led by core members. This original group grew to around 75 adults and children before beginning preview services. We did not get an indication of additional discipleship such as one-on-one mentoring of lay leaders during this phase. Though Kevin, Nancy and their daughters moved to South Hill alone, Jim and Jody Robinson from Second Baptist Houston soon joined them. This couple took the lead in Highpointe’s children’s ministry, and their arrival was an obvious boost for the church. Though the Sullivan’s went to South Hill accompanied only by the Lord, the Lord has raised up a solid ministry team at Highpointe. This method is similar to the team method advocated by Feeney. The difference is that Feeney advocates teams of “three, four or five couples” departing together from the mother or sponsoring church.⁶

⁶Feeney, 150.

Launch Phase

With the church's finances well in the Lord's hands, Kevin and team were better able to focus on the work of planting. The team originally planned a December start to their services, but they decided to wait. They began the first of three preview services in January of 2000. The monthly preview services were well attended and grew to over 400 people by their launch on Easter Sunday. Adding to the success of the previews and eventual launch were the nationally known guest speakers in attendance. Both Scott Kripayne (a native of the Puyallup area) and an ex Dallas Cowboys quarterback attended separate previews. Highpointe followed the previews with successful family events such as skating and a large picnic designed to gather people and build momentum before the launch. Highpointe's first services were held in an elementary school, but the growing congregation soon outgrew that facility. Emerald Ridge High School was in the beginning stages of construction near the Sullivan home when they first arrived. Kevin moved quickly to discover the key contacts that could make this site available for future use. He contacted the school principal who was cool to the suggestion, but gave Highpointe the right of first refusal.

We should note the importance of Kevin doing his homework before approaching the principal. He learned that the principal was known for her genuine love of kids. Kevin said that he felt at times like he was courting the lady – so to speak. He would often write notes of encouragement and promised prayer as she transitioned her staff and pupils to the new facility.

Kevin's kindness and quick thinking proved very beneficial when later the call came from an upset principal. She was angered at hearing from people in the community that the church was going to meet in the new facility before her approval had been given. (Kevin shared that he and possibly others from the core inadvertently leaked the information as they dreamed about the church with neighbors.) Feeling as if the opportunity was sure to fall through, Kevin prayed silently, and then said words to the effect that, "In our excitement to have more opportunities to reach kids, we spoke out of turn." He then asked for her forgiveness. Kevin said that when she heard these words, her tone changed and the offer still stood. Today, the church, in fact, meets in Emerald Ridge High's multi-million dollar state-of-the-art facility with access to its classrooms and auditorium that seats 500. A teacher at the school who attends Highpointe has also noted a change in the principal's attitude toward the church. Referring to the Highpointe community, she said the principal remarked that "there is something different about these people."

Another significant development that gave Kevin greater credibility with his people and the community was the purchase of Portable Church Industries' (PCI) complete "Church in a Box". This acquisition also made getting the church prepared for worship simpler and faster, gaining points with the set-up crew. The complete package cost between 70 and 80 thousand dollars and came with a beautiful trailer (complete with logo), heavy duty rolling cabinets filled with professionally made signs, and other needed items to make church happen (including sound and projector system, toys, and all nursery accoutrements). This system was not only popular with the core group, but more

importantly, it made the church look more organized and communicated “We’re here to stay” to the unchurched community.

Highpointe also came to settle on a worship leader during the launch phase. The church originally considered a person from a church in Canada. Kevin said that his core was ready to offer him the position after only seeing videotape of him leading worship. The prospective leader was accustomed to leading churched people who were responsive. Kevin insisted he come for a trial first. He did well leading the service, but it was clear that he was out of his element. He had difficulty adjusting to the lack of feedback given by a large group of unchurched people in attendance. Not long after this, the church was blessed to find David Hiegel, who now leads worship for Highpointe.

Maturity Phase

This Purpose Driven church continues to maintain direction and growth in the maturity phase. The congregation is made up of approximately 60% previously unchurched people. They have had three baptismal services. Last year they baptized 80 people to lead the Puget Sound Association in baptisms – no small feat for their first year in existence!

On a typical Sunday morning more than five hundred people, including children, attend services at Highpointe. What they find is wonderful. The facilities at Emerald High School are a church planter’s dream. When visitors walk in, after parking close to the entrance in the visitor’s parking lot, they are warmly welcomed in a wide-open foyer with many tables where they can sit, sip coffee, eat doughnuts, and socialize. Multiple professionally decorated manned information tables line the walls, giving guests plenty to

explore. Everything looks professional. Highly visible signs make navigation very easy through the large school. Parents are directed to specialized children's activity centers. Children from birth to four years old attend Tiny Town classes 0 through 4. Kindergarten age children attend Kid's Kingdom. Elementary age children go to J.A.M., where they enjoy high-energy songs, skits, and more. The professionalism makes parents comfortable leaving their children, while they attend worship.

Here again, the facilities shine. Worship takes place in an exceptionally nice auditorium that seats several hundred. It is nice enough to impress, and large enough for the timid to remain anonymous. When visiting, people actually begin to enter the worship environment even before they reach the auditorium, as the contemporary worship music overflows the auditorium's boundaries, beckoning them to come inside. Once inside, everyone is warmly greeted, given a bible if they lack one, and left to take a comfortable seat.

The service caters to the unchurched from start to finish. Guests are told that if they do not own a bible, or do not know where it is, that the bible they have been given is theirs to keep. To drive the point home, during the welcome Kevin invites them to open the bibles and write their names on the inside cover. The music moves from entertaining to engaging, and increasingly fosters participation. When we visited, it was interesting to watch a man who arrived late, move from dormant to slightly toe tapping to more and more willingness to move to the music. Then, as an object now in motion, he was engaged and animated during the sermon. After the sermon, Kevin leads in prayer and a time of quiet reflection. At the conclusion of that reflection time, offerings are taken. During the offering, Kevin tells guests to feel no sense of obligation whatsoever, that the

offering is strictly for members of Highpointe. He does invite everyone to fill out a communication card, which contains places for people to register prayer requests and decisions made during the time of reflection. Those committing their lives to Christ indicate such on the card, which is taken up with the offering. People ready to place their trust in Christ are directed to receive a New Life Packet after the service. Those receiving the packet, which contains Paul Little's *Know What You Believe*, information on baptism, and more, sign for it, and Kevin meets with them that week to discuss their commitment. After the service, people socialize for quite some time in the open foyer.

The church continues to push fun fellowship. They recently held *Retro-Prom Night* where people were to dress in clothes from the 70's and dance to 70's music. They also recently had their first Sunday evening service to celebrate the Lord's Supper and for fellowship. Highpointe had yet another remarkable first this Easter – the first time more than a thousand people attended a worship service! Speaking with Kevin, the following week, he said it was zoo. They were prepared for up to seven hundred and fifty people but a thousand blew them away.

The church is growing rapidly and they are blessed with solid leadership. An excellent staff that exhibits exceptional commitment surrounds Kevin. Though their present facilities are wonderful, they have their eyes on a corner piece of prime real estate in South Hill. God alone knows what the future holds for Highpointe Community Church, but it certainly looks bright from here.

The Crisis

The obvious crisis here is coping with unexpected rapid growth. Kevin says that the infrastructure of the church is not presently equipped to handle everyone coming in. While they have three of their Purpose Driven Model bases in place, and to their credit, they are getting people around the bases, they do not have enough trained small group leaders. Because of this, the groups have grown entirely too large in Kevin's mind. The average group now has between fifteen and twenty adults, and a smaller and smaller percentage of people, approximately 45% at the moment, are involved in them.

The rapid growth is also effecting their funds. While they arrived with lot of money, they are spending a lot and the explosion of new members has not translated into an explosion of money. Their giving averages ten dollars per person per Sunday, which is on par for new members, but less than desired nonetheless. They are presently preparing for a church wide vote on their annual budget, which will be about \$300,000. In my estimation, this should not be a big problem, though Kevin is feeling the potential for a bit of a pinch.

A place I see some potential for trouble with this rapid growth is in the area of polity. The church is pastor lead, but it has no deacons and no elders. They have directors, which function as elders in essence, and they have team leaders, which on a real stretch function something like deacons. Presently the directors meet to make decisions as needed, with Kevin's vote obviously outweighing the others. The team leaders make input through the directors, and the church votes on only the largest issues, such as the annual budget. This is working for them, but with rapid growth, a more formal biblical structure in place would be helpful. Also, by not having formal elders,

Kevin is avoiding the issue of female elders, because he has a talented female director. While perhaps not pleasant and potentially divisive, this is an issue the church needs to come to grips with for the future.

I have little doubt that Highpointe and Kevin will get through the hurdles that come with this rapid growth, but that is unquestionably their biggest challenge at the moment. I do have some concern that Kevin may sacrifice some important matters like teaching difficult doctrine and addressing touchy issues, like women in ministry, on an altar of success. He, and everyone around him, really want to do well and succeed. We hope they do so while upholding biblical standards that most honor God.