

THE FIVE THINGS I WISH I KNEW BEFORE PLANTING A CHURCH

An Interview with Church Planter Drew Field:

Drew and his wife Donna Field have been a part of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan since 1990. Before entering the ministry, Field was an investment banker specializing in media and entertainment companies but left his Wall Street career to attend Westminster Theological Seminary.

In 1999 the Fields made plans for Grace Presbyterian, a Redeemer church plant in Palo Alto, CA. Originally dubbed "the Silicon Valley Project," Grace Presbyterian opened its doors in April 2001 and serves young professionals, families and university students in Santa Clara/San Mateo County. The mission of Grace Presbyterian is to create a church where the gospel, in word and deed, changes both Christians and non-Christians. They seek to be agents of renewal as God expands his Kingdom in Silicon Valley.

Drew and Donna have four children and live in Mountain View, CA.

What were your church-planting experiences before Grace Presbyterian?

My family and I were around Redeemer NYC from the early days as lay people. In 1992, we helped the core families in Westchester County, New York plan what would later become Trinity Presbyterian Church in Rye, New York. Also, we were part of an Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) church plant outside of Philadelphia during seminary. Each of those experiences gave us different perspectives on the early stages of church planting.

Are there misconceptions that you had about the Silicon Valley?

What is it really like out there?

Well, I thought people would be more curious, skeptical. For the most part, people are content and comfortable. Fewer people actually wrestle with Christianity, and they don't want to be bothered.

Also, the Silicon Valley really changed the month we arrived. In 1999, when we were preparing for this plant and raising money, the Valley was a high growth area. People had a lot of money and there were so many people moving into the area. But the tech bubble burst about a week after we signed a lease for the

church and committed to moving to the area. Population has actually declined a bit and perhaps people have a bit more humility.

With all this happening, I thought it would make it harder to start a church.

Perhaps it has, financially, but in other ways it's been a good time. And, we'll be already established by the time the area returns to attracting large groups of people. We're reaching a younger, generally more recent network of people.

After-church fellowship at Grace Presbyterian.

"We will be a church that never closes, that meets during the week in small communities, on-line, or in ministry teams. It is our vision that the whole community, not just the pastor, will be deeply involved in caring for one another."

from the Grace Presbyterian Church

Vision statement

What are 5 things you wish you knew before you started this church?

1) The more that someone seems "really, really excited" early on, the less likely you'll ever see them again. Quiet, dependable people are worth their weight in gold.

2) Church planters tend to default to their last church situation when making decisions, even if that doesn't make sense in the current situation.

3) The biggest obstacle in church planting is the church planter himself.

4) For the first six months you'll be thrilled if anyone calls or emails. A year later you'll be swamped.

5) Start community groups a few weeks before the first worship service so there are places for newcomers and seekers to get involved.

What's your biggest challenge? How are you overcoming this?

I would say that the affluent lifestyle of Silicon Valley presents one of the biggest barriers to the gospel. People ask "why do I need Christ?" even though they have slight indications that they are still empty at their core. Most non-Christians, and even most Christians here, are content with their private life. Our approach has been to lovingly question people's contentedness ("are you really as happy as you look?") while allowing them to question genuine Christianity.

What are some other things that you have learned in your church planting experience?

Every church is different, even if they are based on the same model. Grace Church in Palo Alto is certainly a 'Redeemer' model of church and yet there are many adjustments that have been made. All kinds of things make even similar churches look different -- the gifts of the early leaders, the particular city that the church is in, the unique culture of unbelief in that area, the level of funding, the demographics of the first 100 people, just to name a few.

Every church planter needs to recognize that it takes a few years to develop the right kind of voice and language that fits the new church's context. You cannot just follow a manual and "presto," start a church.

The other thing that was a surprise is that the vision gets imbedded into a new church not only in presenting the vision. It has to become part of the culture in the midst of hundreds of minute decisions and tiny corrections along the way. People 'get' the vision as they see it expressed in actions and in ministry decisions.

What are some other challenges and how are you meeting them?

Here are four. First, cost of living. The cost of living is incredibly high in the Silicon Valley. That makes it more difficult to add staff. But so far that has been matched with great generosity from the congregation.

Then, geography. The Silicon Valley is wide-ranging target area covering nearly 60 square miles. We have to focus on building many local community groups and using electronic communications often.

Meeting space: this is a densely built area with virtually no available meeting space! But our needs have always been met through umm... prayer!

A large unbelieving population. The Valley has a highly non-Christian culture (95%+). I've seen a lot of effective, winsome personal evangelism that is helping to reach these unbelievers.

And volunteers: Some locals told me that I'd never get people to volunteer at a new church. I'm amazed at how active the majority of people are at Grace. I can't take any credit for it; we simply have prayed for new leaders and God provides them every time.

Are you forming partnerships with other ministries in the area?

We have six partnerships with local holistic ministries. We provide volunteers and limited funds, while they provide opportunities for service and training.

We are also partnering with Reformed University Ministries to help launch a campus ministry at nearby Stanford University. A staff couple moved out last summer, and that ministry is off to a terrific start.

Grace has been helped by the support of two local churches and pastors, City Church of San Francisco and Redeemer Santa Rosa. They gave advice, encouragement, people and finances.

Also, a local pastor who isn't in [our denomination] was a valuable prayer partner and encourager. Church planters need that kind of local community to thrive.

What is one thing that has remained consistent through all your church planting experiences?

The theology of grace is rich. It is radical, unique and something that always surprises us. That's the one thing that a church planter can't forget. No context can override this principle.