

Voices From the Field:
“What I’d Like to Share...”
By Karen Kogler

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Hearing someone else’s story – that’s one of the best ways we learn. The experiences of someone else in our field, and the lessons they learned from their experiences, often contain something that applies to our situation. So, in addition to the insights of our lead article author, this issue includes here the thoughts of three other mission planters.

This past July, fourteen mission planters were trained at Mission Planters Institute XI, the eleventh such institute to be held since 1996 by the Center for U.S. Missions. A month after they returned home, the Center asked three of the planters to share some lessons they’ve learned while in the field.

Dan Flynn, Michigan

Dan mission field is in Whitmore Lake/South Lyon, Michigan, an area about 30 miles northwest of Detroit. Dan is not planting a new mission congregation, but is planting an extension of the mother church, St. Luke in Ann Arbor, 15 miles south of his location. The congregation has planned this extension to reach the unchurched, and not to provide convenience for some of its members. Here’s what Dan wished to share:

“It’s helpful to find people in the same boat.” Finding others who are doing what you’re doing is a great support and resource. If those people are not local, it may take more effort and time, but Dan would say it’s worth it for the benefit received. “They’ve been there!”

“Base your mission on your core values.” Your own core values are bound to come through in the mission you plant, so take the time to think through and write down your own core values. Dan says he’s a do-er, not a thinker and a writer, but having forced himself through the process of developing a mission plan, he now finds these written pieces useful for keeping himself on track and for sharing with people as he makes calls and tells people about the new missions.

Planting a “new site” rather than a new congregation has both pluses and minuses, Dan has found. The knowledge and skills of the home church staff, and their willingness to help, is a great resource. However, the mother church is so strong that it’s hard to find a few people willing to be the core group in the new location. “I understand,” Dan says. “I don’t want to leave either! But God calls us, all of us, to step out.” No matter our location, God calls each of us to step out of our comfort for the sake of those who don’t yet know Jesus and His love. That “stepping out” is key for Dan not only for his ministry, but also for the ministry of those working with him.

Mark Eisold, Arkansas

Mark Eisold is also at the beginnings of his ministry, a new congregation planted this summer in Cabot, Arkansas. Mark says that despite his short time here, he's learned many lessons.

“Don't be so quick to change.” Change is inevitable, and often helpful, but Mark says he just had a lesson in the importance of not throwing out the good with the bad. His congregation began worshipping in the facilities of a Presbyterian church at 3:30 p.m. on Sunday afternoons. As soon as he could, Mark began checking out other locations where they could worship on Sunday morning. Despite much higher costs, Mark was ready to encourage the move. But, says Mark, “I was running when I should have been listening.” He suddenly realized that people in the community were already associating their new congregation with that location, even without a sign in front. He decided to talk once more to the board at the Presbyterian church. Unlike earlier conversations, this time they worked out a way for both groups to have morning worship, plus they approved a sign in front. If he had rented somewhere else, he would have lost the many benefits of that location and would have incurred higher costs. “Shut up and listen!” Mark felt God was saying through this experience.

“Most new church plants are made up of two different groups.” This realization was very helpful to Mark. “People with a Lutheran background are going to have different needs than people with no church background, or from other denominations.” Meeting these differing needs may involve different strategies. What is helpful for one group might not be helpful for the other, but the needs of both need to be kept in mind. This perspective has helped Mark in handling people's concerns.

“It's not about me.” Mark admits his nature is to want to see results, and to want to see them now! He tends to think, “I only have three years to do this....” At the Mission Planters Institute, however, Pastor Victor Belton of Peace, Decatur, Georgia, reminded the planters continually of Zechariah 4:6, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord.” This reminder has been a blessing – and a relief! – to Mark.

Edgar Arroyo, California

Edgar is currently an urban missionary for the Nehemiah Project in Los Angeles. He has seven years experience in various missions in the L.A. and neighboring Orange County area. First certified as a deacon through the Lay Leadership Training program of the Pacific Southwest District, he is now a student in the Ethnic Pastor Certification Program at Concordia University, Irvine. He has worked with the Hispanic ministry of Trinity Lutheran, Santa Ana, as well as Trinity Central and Grace Lutheran in L.A.

“Get to know the people,” is a main lesson Edgar says he has learned through his varied experiences in the different locations. The Santa Ana church began a food distribution program in the community. As Edgar arranged visitations with some of the people who

had received food, he noted that many owned their own homes and had two cars in the driveway. They were happy to receive the food, but it was not filling a real need. Talking to them, he realized that there was more need of counseling for alcohol abuse, marriage problems and parenting skills. These needs provided a much better door through which to introduce the love of Jesus Christ.

A few years later he began mission work around Grace Lutheran, located in an area of Los Angeles known for violence and poverty. As Edgar knocked on doors around the church, he learned much:

- In that same area, there were about 10 small churches, all of whom were witnessing and passing out tracts door to door. People were not interested in talking to him because “they’d heard that before.”
- People in that culture were also distrustful of someone coming to the door. He was often mistaken for a police officer or a social worker. Edgar found people more receptive to conversation when he was introduced by a friend or relative, or when people came to him referred by someone else, than when he went to their door
- People had urgent needs for food, housing and employment. A community center that offered assistance in these areas would be an open door for the gospel.
- Another strong need was for programs for children. The area was full of children, few of whom lived with two parents. Parents and children both were very welcoming of programs for the kids. And these children have been the main connection to get to know people in the area.

Edgar says these discoveries greatly impacted his ministry. He summarizes the lesson, simply and succinctly, this way: “Talk to people. Listen to people. Make your plans accordingly.”