

Stages of Organic Growth

Missional Core Team Phases of Austin City Life

Ecclesiology in Process

Just prior to planting Austin City Life, my functional ecclesiology was challenged and reshaped.¹ I moved from thinking in a traditional launch-driven framework to being shaped by missional, organic ecclesiology. My basic ecclesiology did not waver from *Reformed in doctrine, Baptist in sacrament, Missional in nature*. Rather, it was the functional expression and structure of the church that was reshaped. As a result, I began ACL as an organic church rooted in gospel soil, with a launch date in view, which flowered into an organic church with no launch date at all.

What follows are brief, incomplete summaries of the phases of our organic growth that led up to the creation of our missional communities and public gatherings. Some of it was planned; some of it wasn't. I tried to remain very sensitive to the Spirit in the development of our relationships and comprehension of the vision. I made mistakes. These were opportunities for the gospel to shine in its sufficiency.

Time frames below are an approximation. *Our people regularly engaged in missional conversation and social outreach in between our gatherings. One of the main goals was to progressively add the elements of church life found in Acts 2-4 into our community experience (food, fellowship, teaching, gathering, worship, preaching).*

Stages of Our Organic Growth

Meals and Mission (1 month)

Our first three or four meetings focused on community and vision. *Instead of holding "vision-casts" in which disconnected contacts came to an informational meeting and left disconnected, we started our meeting with home-cooked meals and fellowship.* This became a hallmark of our City Groups (missional communities). The intention was to build the church on Jesus-centered community with a missional identity. We felt like we should emphasize relationships and vision first, which meant cultivating community and mission in the gospel.

Vision and Mission (2 months)

The next couple of months were spent imparting and discussing the core values of the vision of Austin City Life. This was conducted in a very dialogical fashion, which allowed the values to percolate and to be refined in our community. It also afforded us the opportunity to contextualize our values. For example, after a discussion regarding "truth," "gospel," and "word" as a core value, we deliberately chose not to use "gospel" terminology since "gospel" is so misunderstood in Texan Christian culture. We opted for truth. During this time I explored and encouraged non-Christian attendance. We had one conversion and several de-churched

¹ Significant influences were: Mark Moore (Providence Church Plano); Neil Cole, *Organic Church*; Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, and Tim Chester (Crowded House), *Total Church*.

people attend or join. The resistant nature of many unchurched Austinites made building a mixed (Christian and non-Christian) missional core group very difficult.

Commitment Night

At the end of about three months, I met with each family and asked them to consider committing their time, creativity, spiritual gifts, and finances to the vision of ACL. This gave me an opportunity to field questions that had not been asked in public, filter prospective members, and receive encouragement regarding the Spirit's work in our community. Then we had a commitment night in which we celebrated with a grand meal in our home, at a long table, and I gave some biblical and cultural reflections on being the church in Austin. I distilled the big vision into three very basic, biblical concepts that were easy to grasp. We ended with communion and worship.

Bible Study (2 months)

Next we moved into a phase that increased the elements of church by adding the authoritative component of teaching. I lead them through a study I developed called *Themes in Luke-Acts: The Seeds and Shape of the Missional Church*. It was didactic and dialogical. It allowed our people to get a sense of my ability and style of teaching, as well as to grasp the biblical foundations for missional ecclesiology. Many remarked how studying the Bible strengthened their convictions and practice of missional church. Eventually this grew into a full-blown gathering that met in a really ugly office building, but it was centrally located and free. The main intention behind this meeting was to provide a final component of extended worship and preaching. We had 20-25 core people and floating visitors.

Strategy and Community (3 months)

After a sufficient depth of community and practice in mission was established, we introduced a strategy/community meeting that met for a much shorter amount of time during the week. This meeting ran in addition to our Saturday Bible Study/gathering and was aimed at cultivating deeper community, missional health, and ministry basic structures and leaders. I developed some *Missional and Structural Health Indicators* to guide us toward a "launch." This ensured that basic ministries would be in place once we went public (Children, Worship, Hospitality). We corporately wrestled with timing of launch and if a launch was even necessary. During this time we introduced a monthly prayer meeting, training for City Group leaders, and deployed the City Groups prior to a public gathering. This was an intentional move to build the church on missional communities, not on a service.

Gatherings and Children's Ministry

We eventually moved into a city center location that we had been praying about for months. God dropped a killer theatre into our lap for way below market value. We moved into that venue and initiated Sunday morning gatherings once our missional and structural health was in place. We did no advertising and simply invited people in our social networks, believers and unbelievers. We began to grow in our gathering and in our City Groups from the beginning. Children's ministry took a lot of energy and was worth the effort. Lay leaders were critical.