

**The Harbor Story**  
**Lessons for Every Church Plant a Church**  
**MNA Lunch at GA**  
**June 30, 2010**

**Introduction**

**A. I want to thank Jim Bland and his great team for inviting me!**

1. Over the past several years, I have not traveled much. But when Ted contacted me and asked me to speak at this lunch I was very excited to do it.
2. Why? Because I have a passion for seeing lost people saved!  
And you and I know the most effective evangelistic strategy is planting new churches.
3. And also, I am very excited about the “Every Church Plant a Church” initiative!  
So I have been asked to tell the Harbor story and suggest some possible lessons that will help us reach the goal of “Every Church Plant a Church”.

**B. Let me put Harbor in context.**

1. In 1976, Liz & I entered Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia.  
It was there that we connected with our three primary mentors: Ed Clowney, John Frame and Jack Miller, and I served as a staff elder at New Life – Jenkintown.
2. From 1980 to 1994, we ministered at New Life Church in Escondido, CA.  
And I taught part-time at the seminary.
3. From 1994 to 1999, we served at Redeemer, in NYC.  
Liz was on our counseling staff and I was the executive pastor. Our experience there with Tim and Kathy shaped our love and vision for the city.

**Lesson #1:** It is not enough to have gifts and training, you also need primary and peer mentors in your life.

**It was while we were at Redeemer that God called us to plant Harbor.**

Prior to moving to NYC, Liz and I thought that at our age it would be good to think about ministry in 5-year blocks. So every 6 months, we would make a short list. Every time we did it, Redeemer was at the top of list. We loved working with Tim and Kathy! We loved our work, the staff, the church and the city. We added some other options but they could not compare with Redeemer. One thing that we did not list was planting another church. Usually one of us would say: “What about planting another church?” And the other would say, “Do you have the energy?” “No! Do you?” “No!” So it wasn’t on the list. I was training and coaching church planters, but I was convinced I was too old to do it myself.

**But in the summer of 1998, a very strange thing happened!**

Out of the blue, I got a sudden desire to plant a church in Downtown San Diego! It made absolutely no sense to me—it wasn’t on the list. Fortunately, I remembered John Frame saying: “Whenever I get the urge to exercise, I just sit still and after awhile the urge goes away!” So I decided to take my mentor’s advice. In this case, it meant that I

did not mention this crazy idea to anyone—especially Liz. But three weeks went by and the desire did not go away. In fact, it had grown so strong, I knew the only way to douse the desire was to tell Liz. So after three weeks, I asked Liz to sit down. And I said: “Liz, this is crazy but I have a strong desire to plant a church again!” And she said, “That is strange, because three weeks ago, I said to our daughter Kim, I think I am ready to plant a church again.” And when I then told her San Diego, she was really excited!

**Lesson #2:** You are never too old to plant a church!

We were 52 when God called us to plant Harbor! We are 64 now and we are still planting churches. You are never too old to plant a church!

**It was also at Redeemer that Harbor’s model was shaped.**

Redeemer’s morning service at Hunter College was almost full. So do we go to a second service in the same spot? Or do we find a bigger facility? Or is there another option? Tim and I went on a retreat and decided there was another option: add another service but do it on the Upper West Side! In our planning, we contacted Randy Pope at Perimeter and spoke to his staff about the multi-congregational model they had done. And we also spoke with Terry Gyger who was using a multi-congregational model with Brazilian church planters.

**Lesson #3:** It is not enough to have a church planting model, you also need to experience that model or learn from others who are effectively doing that model.

**At the end of 1998, we visited San Diego.**

We found that the Downtown area was beginning to be re-developed. All signs were a go for a Downtown first plant. While in California, we drove up to visit Phil Clark, who was a former MNA Coordinator. I sat down with Phil shared my idea and asked him for advice on funding. He took a 3X5 card and wrote down three categories: Family and Friends; Key Donors; and Churches. And then he made two columns: Conservative Estimate and Best Estimate. He mentioned several Key Donors. One of them was a couple with whom Liz and I had connected years before. Phil said, “This couple usually gives \$25,000 to a church planter. So put that down under the “Conservative” column. But I know they really like you and Liz so in the “Best” column put \$75,000. I was really excited.

**Lesson #4:** It is not enough to fund-raise, you also need to seek out wise counselors to develop a strategy!

**The following Sunday I was at the morning service at Redeemer.**

After the service, the man Phil and I were talking about came up to me! I was very surprised because he lived over 1,000 miles from NYC. I asked him what he was doing in NYC and he said he was part of consultation on finances. And he said, “There’s a lot of money out there!” And I said, “Could we get together tomorrow!” And he said, “Sure, I will meet you in your office at 8 o’clock in the morning.”

So, the next morning I went into the office and typed out a one-page “Church Planting Proposal.” I explained the multi-site, multi-congregational model and did 5 year, 10

year, and 15 year projections of the number of churches. And at the bottom, I wrote funding need for this church planting movement as \$500,000 over four years. I handed the proposal to the man and he read it over. Then he looked at me and said: "I see you need \$500,000, how much were you hoping I would give?" Well, I should have been ready for that question but I wasn't. The obvious answer was \$75,000 over three years. But instead I heard myself say, "I was hoping you would give half!" Now, as soon as that came out of my mouth, I knew that was ridiculous and I was just about to say: "I'm just kidding!" But before I could say that, he said, "Well, I never do anything without first praying and talking with my wife!" Several weeks went by and then I got a call. It was our friend! "I just sold a piece of land and I am sending you a check for \$244,000! Over the past ten years, this man and his wife have given to Harbor Church Planting \$1 million dollars.

**Lesson #5:** It is not enough to ask key donors for money, you also need to be willing to ask them for a specific amount!

### **At the end of 1998, I called my good friend Doug Swagerty!**

Liz and I met Doug and Lois at New Life Church in Philadelphia. We began to do ministry together with them. When I was called to Escondido, we asked them to join us in planting the church there. Doug became my associate pastor. And in 1984, Doug and Lois planted our first daughter church in Oceanside. In 1986, we planted a second daughter church in San Marcos. And with our Presbytery, we set a goal of "21 by the 21<sup>st</sup>!" Twenty-one new churches by the 21<sup>st</sup> century! But due to some problems in the presbytery, we experienced a death of the vision! One day, a few years ago, someone reminded me of "21 by the 21<sup>st</sup>!" And suddenly, I made the connection: Harbor was the resurrection and transformation of that vision!

**Lesson #6:** The death of a vision is not the end of the story!

### **So, I called Doug and asked if they would team up with us again!**

He flew back to NYC, to meet with Liz and me. Doug started working one day a week for Harbor. As Harbor grew he increased to full-time. Doug's contribution to Harbor was uniquely significant. A church planting movement not only needs a shared vision; it also needs a strategy, structure and systems. Our strategy and structure is shaped by our multi-congregational, multi-site model. The crucial role Doug played was installing the systems. Doug developed the policies, processes, and procedures that make Harbor work consistently with its vision and values. The proof of Doug's effectiveness is that a little over a year ago, Doug accepted another call, but the infrastructure he implemented is still functioning fine.

**Lesson #7:** It's not enough to have a movement leader, you also need a movement facilitator who develops and implements the organizational systems!

### **But there is another lesson to learn from Doug!**

Ed Clowney used to say: "Presbyterianism is doomed to failure, unless the Holy Spirit is in it." One church meeting in multiple congregations and multiple sites is doomed to

failure, unless the Holy Spirit is in it. The Holy Spirit used Doug's servant leadership to create an environment of mutual love, consensus decision-making, and functional trust!  
**Lesson #8:** It is not enough to have gifts of knowledge, speaking, and leading, the indispensable ingredient of the Christian leader is personal holiness. My friend Doug is a holy man and that is why he is so respected as a leader.

### **Doug went back to San Diego, while Liz and I remained at Redeemer and raised support and prayer partners!**

I once heard someone say: "Nothing fuels prayer like answers to prayer!" So, we regularly sent our prayer partners answers to their prayers. Let me give you some examples:

1. Prayer Partners: Pray for 100! Each month we updated them as the number increased and passed 100! One year later, we told them we now had 558 prayer partners.
5. Friendship Building: You prayed that Community Group participants would be cultivating relationships with 200 "not-yet" or "un-churched" Christians. We estimate that over 240 such relationships are being cultivated.
9. Strategic Appointments and Startling Conversions: You prayed that God would give us open doors so conversions would take place that would get San Diegans "gossiping" about Jesus. God has been giving us strategic appointments on a daily basis (we give them examples). And we see evidence that God is changing lives.
10. Diversity: You prayed that God would show the power of his love by making us a church that reflects the racial, ethnic, and class diversity of San Diego! From the very first service there was wonderful diversity, and now Leadership Network says we are one of the most diversified churches in all of Southern California.

**Lesson #9:** It is not enough to recruit prayer partners; you must mobilize prayer by regularly updating them with specific answers to prayers!

### **Liz and I arrived in San Diego in May of 1999.**

We moved into an apartment in Downtown San Diego. We looked at each other and said, "What do we do now?" And so we started praying for open doors for the gospel. That day we saw a poster in our building inviting us to take a cruise on a yacht that was owned by our neighbor. We quickly signed up! When it was over, we really did not see an open door. But as we were walking home we met a couple. Liz walked with Sally. And I walked with Bob. Sally asked Liz, and Bob asked me, "Why did you move to San Diego?" And Liz and I both explained we came to start a church. Each of them said, "We haven't been in church for over 30 years! But we are interested." Bob and Sally became Christians and helped us start Harbor.

**Lesson #10:** It is not enough to re-shuffle Christians into new churches, to change a city you must reach non-Christians and un-churched Christians, and then mobilize them to reach others.

### **Our plan was that Liz and I would plant three sites.**

The first one would be in Downtown San Diego!

We also did demographics for three other areas: La Jolla, Chula Vista, and Point Loma. Our tentative plan was that La Jolla would be our second site and Chula Vista would be our third site. Once we did three sites, we would then recruit other church planters and become multi-congregational. But one month after we arrived in San Diego, we got a visit from Bob and Karen Klein who had just been approved for church planting. MNA told them about our plan. Long story short! They joined us and planted in the La Jolla area one year after we planted in Downtown. Downtown's attendance was about 100 including kids. In fact, most of our second sites were planted when the first site attendance was 100 to 200.

**Lesson #11:** It is not enough to have church planting in your DNA; it has to permeate everything you do from the beginning: your model for church planting, specific future locations, goals, upfront fund-raising, and especially congregational vision casting! As a result, we have never had any push-back when we tell people, "We are going to give-away people to plant a new church and we need new ministry leaders and team members to take their place." And we didn't even get pushback when Downtown planted a church 3 miles away in Uptown, and Russ and Diane Kapusinski planted Harbor-Chula Vista on the same Sunday in October 2004.

### **We asked our prayer partners to pray for more Church Planters.**

Over the past ten years, God has sent us seven additional church planting couples: Bob & Karen Klein, Paul & Linda Kim, Russ & Diane Kapusinski, Stephen & Bradford Phelan, Steven & Lainie Cooper, Jim & Michelle Huster, and Church Planting interns Mike & Mandy McBride. In addition, God has sent us six assistant pastor couples who assist church planters: Michael and Candace Bottomley, Eric & Emily Kapur, Darin and Rebecca Stone, Ramon & Gloria Robles, Phil & Audrey Mershon, Eduardo and Elizabeth Avila, and Roberto and Mana Shim. Together we have planted nine Harbor sites. Our goal for the next ten years is to plant 20 additional sites. Our goal for 2040 is to have 100 Harbor sites in San Diego.

**Lesson #12:** It is not enough to plant a lot of churches; you must leverage your strengths by working together as a team. (For some more thoughts on the benefits of team ministry see the attached.)

### **In 1992, I noticed that my balance was deteriorating.**

Ten years later, my condition was diagnosed through a DNA test as a neurological disease called Spino-Cerebellar-Ataxia #8. In 2006, our oldest grandchild had a unilateral cyst that threatened the loss of his arm. That same year, our youngest grandchild was born with Down syndrome and severe hemophilia. In September 2009, I had colon-cancer surgery, followed by 6 months of chemotherapy.

I hate all these diseases, but I love how God turned the tables on evil and used these things for good in my life, Liz and my relationship, our family, church, and friends who do not yet know Jesus. The weaker I get the better Harbor does!

**Lesson #13:** Delight in your weaknesses, so that God's power may rest on you, and so Jesus will get the glory not you and me!

**Finally, I want to thank Jim Bland and our MNA team!**

Thank you for the way you are serving and resourcing the Presbyteries, and the church planting networks and movements. I would not be here today talking about the “miracle of Harbor”, if it wasn’t for all of your help, resources and encouragement.

**Lesson #14:** “Every Church Plant a Church” can radically change people, cities and regions throughout North America, as we partner with our MNA team.

## **Some Further Thoughts on Teams and Alliances And Multi-Site Church Planting**

Whatever your model is for church planting, I want to encourage you to leverage your church planting by thinking Team and Alliances. If you are doing some sort of daughter church planting, consider this: rather than rush your daughter churches to get their own session, which often can lead to problems, encourage them to stay with the mother church for an extended time period. Here are some of the advantages you will experience:

- **Shared vision for your city/region and the world**
- **Centralized administration frees up planters for ministry**
- **A “band of brothers” -- You are not out there on your own**
- **On-going training, coaching, and mentoring**

Also consider doing multi-site. Here are some of the advantages you will experience:

- **Reach more people with the Gospel**
- **Leverage resources – people, money and time**
- **Big church ministries, small church feel**
- **More opportunities for lay-leader involvement**