

# THE CHURCH PLANTING PODCAST

with Greg Nettle



Greg Nettle:

Hey friends. I'm really excited to have my friend David Nelms on The Church Planting Podcast for this episode. David is the founder and president of The Timothy Initiative. It's a church planting, really a multiplication organization that's planting tens and tens of thousands of churches around the world. Really exciting about how they're transitioning and transferring all of their church planting principles, multiplication principles, what they've learned in countries around the world, into the United States right now. And David is with us to talk about discipleship. What that means, how to start a movement of multiplication in our churches. I'm so excited to welcome my friend and colleague David Nelms, who's the leader of the Timothy initiative to the church planting podcast. Welcome David.

David Nelms:

Greg. I am thrilled to be with you here. I love Stadia. I'm I'm all things Stadia. Okay. So thrilled to be here with you.

Greg Nettle:

Well, thank you. But you have so much to say to all of our listeners and viewers David, you and I have had the opportunity to spend some time together finally, in the, in the past year and to get time face to face in person as well as on zoom. And I've just been so impressed and thought, this is the leader that I wanna learn from, and that I think our and viewers can learn a great deal from as well. David, talk to us a little about, I mean, we're great partners with church planting. Talk to us a little bit about the Timothy initiative, if you don't mind.

David Nelms:

Yeah. Greg, TTI, the Timothy initiative, we take our name from 2 Timothy 2:2, which I believe is the most important verse in the Bible dealing with making disciple makers.

Greg Nettle:

Expound on that David.

David Nelms:

Well, in that verse, you see the expectation of multiplication, Paul's disciple, Timothy, who disciplined faithful people who disciplined others also see, I don't believe the great commission is just making disciples. I believe it's making disciples who make disciples because when Jesus spoke in Matthew 28, when he said, go make disciples of every nation, he then said, teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. He just commanded them to make disciples. So what he was really saying was make disciples who make disciples, who make disciples,

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who make disciples. So that, that realization finally worked through my brain and we came to realize that that that's what we're supposed to be doing. So I was pastor at a church in South Florida at the time. And we came up with this idea, let's plant seven to thousand churches. I'm an old church planter like you.

Greg Nettle:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Just a, just a small vision though. 7,000.

David Nelms:

Well, they were little churches. Okay. But 7,000 house fellowships across several countries in Asia. And so that's kind of how we got started. It was started in a local church. And by the way, I just wanna say this to your partners. We believe as you do the local church is the front lines. We would say absolutely TTI is not the front lines. We're simply an extension of the local church, but the local church is where it's all at.

Greg Nettle:

Okay. So there's so much to unpack in, in what you just shared. And it was one of the reasons I, it kind of rocked my world when you were sharing that with me. Okay. So vision to plant 7,000 churches before we dive into all the discipleship stuff, which is what we're gonna learn from today. So where are you at today? Give us kind of an update. Did, where are you at in that 7,000 goal? How many churches are you in? What's going on?

David Nelms:

Yeah, well, originally it was a three year goal. It was a three year project. And I'm your typical senior pastor. I had a start date, finish date, and then I, I don't wanna be paying for it the rest of my life, but it took off and we're beginning our fifth, we just started our 15th year. We're 14 years old and we have just passed the 113,000 mark of churches that have been started. So it's and listen, we we believe we're just getting started. I we're just now figuring out the right questions to ask. Okay.

Greg Nettle:

Okay. So David I, I I'm, you know, I mean, all of us are just kind of flabbergasted yet of goal 7,000 churches. You're now, well, over a hundred thousand churches planted. How many countries are you in

David Nelms:

Currently? We are in 31 countries. We, we have operated, I think, in about 35 or 40, but currently in 31.

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Greg Nettle:

Okay. And give us the average size. When you say church and house fellowships, what, like how many people are involved in each of these church plants on, on average?

David Nelms:

Yeah. Average is gonna be about 20 people. We use the elephant rabbit analogy. We'd be rabbit churches, small, but designed to multiply as opposed - Keep in mind, Greg, most of our work is among unreached people, groups which tend to be Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist animist. And I, I like to say a lot of these groups are unreached for a reason. They don't wanna be reached in many places. It's illegal to do what we're doing. You can't build buildings, you can't be open with, with with preaching the gospel. So the churches tend to be smaller and again, they're designed to reproduce.

Greg Nettle:

Okay. Okay. So you know that so 20 to 30 people, we'll just use the small average. There are 20 people you know, 113,000 in churches. That's well over 2 million people that have been reached with the gospel. Now, now this leads me back to the rapid multiplication. So how this, I mean, this is a movement. So talk about how that works, David.

David Nelms:

Yeah. Well, you know, it's, it's really amazing, Greg. Multiplication always trumps addition, always. It's a little slow on the front end. You, you know, you use the old illustration of double a dollar a day. It takes a couple of weeks before you've got any money there doubling that dollar, but you keep doubling it every day for a month. And at some point it just takes off. And that's what we're seeing. I, I just saw a report two weeks ago that just blew me away in a five or six country project that we're doing in east Africa, which is one of my favorite places. Our, our training goes for two years. A batch of students goes for two years. During that two years, we train 2,400 Timothy's. A Timothy is a church planter. Those 2,400 Timothy's planted 2,900 churches. However, the 10 Timothy's Timothy, the next generation, we call that person Titus. They planted 3,400 churches. The second generation planted more than the first generation. And we had over 30 3rd generation churches. And on top of that, the trainers, the Pauls, they planted another a hundred, 150 churches. So that's in two years, we have never seen multiplication like that on such a large scale. When you're talking about 2,400 church planters being trained at one time, I've seen it with 50 church planters, but never never that large. So multiplication is, listen. I, I drank the Kool-Aid man. I'm not going back. I, I love what I'm seeing.

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Greg Nettle:

Okay. So, David we're seeing this kind of multiplication with the Timothy initiative, You know, in Africa, in Asia. Talk about it. It's a challenge in the United States in the west in general. Would you mind diving into that a little bit?

David Nelms:

Yeah, well the USA is a whole different animal. Okay. And we, this past year we saw 101 discovery, Bible studies/microchurches started across the states. Our goal was 100 this year, we've set a goal to see 300 started. Now these are gonna be in the USA. They're gonna be even smaller. They're gonna be about 10 people each. Okay. 10, 12 people each. Okay. So what I just said is nothing to write home about, but it is a start. And if we can go from 100 to 300 and then 300 to 500 and 500 to a thousand in a few years, we're gonna start seeing some, some significant traction. There are several factors that get in the way of the movement world here in the United States. And one of them is there has to be a major paradigm shift away from church growth to church health. And by, by a healthy church, I would define a healthy church as a disciple making church. Okay. So there has to be a, and a focused intentionality, not on getting larger, but on raising up disciple makers who will in turn reproduce. And I would say in the United States, I don't think our system systems are broken. Somebody said our systems are perfectly designed to get the results we're getting. Our churches are designed primarily to attract large groups of people that we give the gospel to. And that's good. I praise God for that. That's not bad. That's a very good thing, but, but there needs to be a, a more focused intentionality on raising up disciple makers, as opposed to primarily focusing on church growth. Does that make sense?

Greg Nettle:

Well, it does. And it's painful, you know? And I think as our listeners know, I led a very rapidly growing megachurch here in Northern Ohio for 25 years before realizing really the full implications and leveraging out church planting and multiplication. And that's largely because in the United States we celebrate growth, right. We're not really celebrating, we're just now starting to celebrate multiplication. And so it comes back to this principal that you or, and I were sitting on my couch discussing not too many months ago of the great commission. So under unpack that again for us David, the, the heart of the great commission.

David Nelms:

Yeah. Well, and before I do, let me just state, cuz I don't wanna, I don't wanna give any misconception here. I too have pastored a megachurch and I wish we had a megachurch in every city on the face of the earth. We're not anti, I'm not one of those anti-bigchurch guys. No, far from it. Okay. Far, far, far from it. However, however, the cost and the, the ability to reproduce those things, it's very difficult. And there estimated 5 million settlements in the world

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today that are in need of a church. And how in the world are we gonna do that in the next 5,000 years? If we don't change our strategy up a little bit.

Greg Nettle:

Yeah. David, you know, there's, there's more than a billion children on the planet under the age of 18, thinking about the new X generation who have no access to the good news of Jesus Christ. Yeah.

David Nelms:

So we, we can't we've, we've gotta be open to, to looking it different ways of doing it. So we're not saying don't have mega churches. I wanna have all among half. We're saying the focus needs to be on making disciple makers. What however, large or small the church is because that's the great commission all my life. I thought the best way to make disciples was by planting churches. I came to realize the best way to plant churches was by making disciples. I had it backwards. And as I looked at the great commission of fresh and a new Jesus, didn't say go plant churches. He said, go make disciples. And all my life, as I looked is I read the book of acts and, and Greg through the EPIs I had in my mind that Paul and those guys were going into cities to start churches. I don't, I'm not convinced they were, I'm more convinced they were going where they went to make disciples. But when you make, because that's what Jesus told them to do. But when you go into a city and you lead someone to Christ and you begin discipling that person and they in turn reach their loved one, their friend, their neighbor, pretty soon, those new believers will gather together when they gather together they'll worship. The father they'll study the scriptures. They'll pray. They'll fellowship together. The byproduct of making disciple makers is churches spring up, but the focus was not on planting churches. It was on making disciple makers. And if I can be a little bit caustic here, if I can have permission to do that, I would say absolutely. I would say we have mastered the art in the United States of, of we have learned how to spend a million dollars to plant churches without making hardly any new disciples. Yes. So yes. Uand again, I'm, I hope we can fill these churches as big as possible, but the focus needs to be on making disciples who make disciples because that's the great commission.

Greg Nettle:

Okay. Am I, am I correct in hearing you? Cause I wanna, I wanna make sure this point's driven home for all of us, that a person is not a disciple Unless they are making disciples.

David Nelms:

Well, that's what I've come to believe. I heard somebody say once, I was sitting in a pastor's office in Iowa and the pastor looked at me. We were talking about this very subject. He said, David, if you're not making disciples who make disciples, you're not making disciples because disciples make disciples. And it's like my, I thought my head was gonna explode. I said, wait a



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minute, say that again. He said, if you're not making disciples who make disciples, you're not making disciples because disciples make disciples. The first page of the Bible tell us everything reproduces after its own kind. And those early disciples that Jesus trained, the 12 apostles, they made disciples. And again, Matthew 28, the commissions make disciples and then teach them to do everything I've command. And he just commanded them to make disciples. So I see it all through. I, I, I didn't see it before, but I see it now. Disciples make disciples. If you haven't made, if your disciple hasn't made a disciple, I'm not sure that you've made a disciple.

Greg Nettle:

Okay. this is just such gold, David. Let's say you're going through this process. And so you're, let's just say we're gathering, we're starting, we're gathering 10 people in our home, sitting down, you know, in the west, we'd start with a Bible study. Right. you guys do kind of a, a, a more pragmatic approach to scripture study. Could you unpack that a bit?

David Nelms:

Yeah, we, we now if we're talking about, if we're talking about reaching out to unchurched lost people, or we would begin with, with what's called a discovery Bible study or a DBS. Okay. And a DBS that was designed by a great missionary leader named David Watson and DBS was designed over in Asia to bring unchurched, lost people primarily from under each people groups to a point basically discipling them to a decision for Jesus Christ. But it's designed not just to teach the new believer about Jesus and teach 'em the scriptures, but it's really designed to teach them how to teach the scriptures to the next generation. It's a reproducible method. Your listeners can just Google DBS discovery, Bible study. They'll get a lot better explanation than for me. But my, my condensed version would be start with the, the gospel stories of Jesus. The red letter stories. There's a bunch of 'em. Most of 'em are about 10 or 15 verses. You got three or four people there. Have somebody read the 10 or 15 verses the, the red letter story. Have somebody else read it again, then ask somebody, put it in your own words. What did you just hear? Ask somebody else? What did they leave out? Put it in your own word. What are they just hear? Or what are we just hear? And then there's four questions you can ask. So the questions can vary. But the questions I use are, what did we learn about God in this passage? What did we learn about people in this passage? The third question varies, depending upon the text, it could be in this passage, is there a command to obey or temptation to avoid or a promise to claim or an example to follow? It just depends on the text. Okay. And then the fourth question is who do you know that needs to hear the story? And so the idea is we send them out now to share the story. Once a few of them accept Christ. After that fourth question, we will then stop and pray and say, let's see you ask the Lord, Lord, what would you have me to do? Based on this passage, from your word that I just read. And then whatever they tell us, they're hearing from the Lord, that's their assignment. We hold them accountable to do that. So it's, what's called obedience based discipleship with accountability. We don't just hear the word, but James one, if we hear it without doing it, we have deceived

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ourselves. And by the way, I think our churches are filled with, with self to see, see people who, because we know it, we think that's maturity, but knowing it and doing are two different things. So that would be okay.

Greg Nettle:

Okay. So talk about, talk about the accountability piece. So well, do you, how do we hold people accountable? Well,

David Nelms:

You got, you just gotta ask them in our, when we started TTI, there was no accountability to share Christ and the numbers were as flat as a pancake. But when we started saying, we want each of our Timothys to share their story with five people a week, and next week, when we meet back together, your Paul, your trainer's gonna ask you who you shared with and what happened. That changed everything. And by the way, to hold others accountable to do we have to do it ourselves. It's a two way accountability. They hold us accountable. We hold them accountable. And so what we have found is with, and by the way, accountability is the missing ingredient in American disciple making processes. We don't hold people accountable because we know they don't wanna be held accountable and we don't wanna chase them off. We have looked at accountability as the means of chasing off those who are not willing and able to do what they're supposed to do. What we're left with are the faithful ones, which 2 Timothy 2:2 says those are the ones we're supposed to be training the faithful people. Paul said. So you end up focusing on pouring your life into those who are actually going to do something with it. So the accountability is to us, that's the game changer.

Greg Nettle:

Okay. So let me, so, so you, you you've met, you've done the DBS Bible study. We've prayed together what is God telling me to do, and then we'll what, next time you gather together? So is somebody like, like, are you writing this stuff down?

David Nelms:

Yeah. You have a scribe or secretary writes everything down the next week. When you gather first thing you do, we use the old three looks approach. Look back, look up, look forward. It's another some sometimes it's called the, at the three looks or the, the three thirds, maybe. So when you meet back together, the first thing we do is we look back at the previous week. What did we say we were gonna do? And all right, did we do it? Then we look up, looking up is the fresh lesson from the next red letter story from the vibe that came down from above, then we look forward based on what we just learned from God, what are we gonna do with it? So it's look back, look up, look forward, by the way, Greg, that's another reproducible method. The brand new believer after two or three weeks understands, look back, look up, look forward, look back, look up, look forward. So what you're really doing is not just teaching them the Bible

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and teaching them to follow through all the scriptures, but you're actually teaching them how to lead the next study themselves with those they reach, make sense.

Greg Nettle:

Perfect. And if you are starting a new church plant nowadays, David you know, from, from what you know now, from what you knew, then what would you make your priority in, in starting a new church today?

David Nelms:

I would focus on put a heavy emphasis on personal evangelism. I believe disciple making begins with evangelism and, and once someone came to Christ, I would spend as much time as I could as much time as they would give me focusing on raising up that person to become a disciple maker. Remember Jesus, when he left for, for heaven had 120 believers in the upper room. There were some, there were a few scattered through Galilee. I know that, but 120 there in the upper room, those 120 morphed into, within what, 20, 30 years they turned the world upside down. The, it, it went very rapidly, the growth, but what we often forget is Jesus spent three years training those 12. I heard someone say not long ago, Jesus didn't turn the world upside down. The people he disciple turned the world upside down. He did it through them. So now that was a long, slow process. Three years. He only ended up with, with 12 minus one in the 120 in the upper room. That's nothing to write home about. Okay. But those people, well, he trained, turned the world upside down within 20, 30 years. And so that's kind of the idea. I would say, focus on 10 or 12 and in the next 20, 30 years you're gonna turn the world upside down. Can I, can I illustrate it, Greg? Uh I pastored three churches over 37 years, Maryland, Iowa, Florida, 35 years. I was a lead pastor. If you take the attendance of those three churches and add 'em together at the time I left, it would total 6,000 people. It took me 37 years of blood, sweat, and tears, hard labor to reach 6,000 for people this past year using a multiplication system. After 14 years, we planted a church every 20 minutes in one week in one week, this past year, we reached 10,000 new believers. Not that raise their hand and pray to prayer, but are connected to a church. So we are now getting more done in one week than it took me 37 years to accomplish. Now that's the power of multiplication. It doesn't happen overnight. It, Jesus spent three years training those guys, but then it takes off. And so we Americans, we want it like yesterday. We want real quick. And it bothers us when we start a church and we're only running a hundred or fifty. The, and a new church starts and they're running 500 overnight. That kind of bothers us a little bit. And I, I would say to, to your, to your, the guys you're training, focus on the great commission and by the way, whether you ever get big, whether it multiplies or not, Jesus told us to make disciples. That's what we're supposed to be you doing.



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Greg Nettle:

And if we're being faithful in that, yeah. Then, then, then we're hearing the well done. My good and faithful servant. I was smiling, David, because you said it's nothing to write home about with the 120, you know, in the upper roomish. And I, I was just thinking, I just imagine Jesus, you know, writing home and saying, yeah, dad the, the church planting efforts down here, haven't gone very well. You know, I have, I have about 120 people and because that's the way we would look like, look at it through our lens a lot of times. And yet tho those were the seeds because they'd had disciple making embedded in them that Jesus was able to say, dad, I have 120 disciple makers ready of changed the world.

David Nelms:

Amen.

Greg Nettle:

Amen. And so, so it's, this is just such important stuff, David, and I'm so thankful for the work that you personally are doing and all of the disciples with Timothy Initiative and what we can learn. I love learning from our church planters around the world and how we can help one another. Right. It, it's not, it's not those of us who are in the west who have all the answers and, and are helping the world. I mean, we, we, we do help the world in many ways, but yet we need to recognize another paradigm shift that there's so much that, that we learn from one another, as church planters around the world.

David Nelms:

Yeah. And Greg, I think there's much, I like about stadia and you, but that's, that's one of them, your humility, your willingness to learn. And I wanna state to your listeners, neither TTI nor myself have ever had an original thought, okay. Everything we teach, we learn from somebody else, so need to be humble and it, and just accept, Hey, maybe there's stuff out there we need to know.

Greg Nettle:

And we're looking forward to our continued partnership. David, if listeners, if you wanna get involved with the stadia TTI partnership, just go to [www.stadiachurchplanting.org](http://www.stadiachurchplanting.org). And we have lots of information there and would love to talk with you. Hey, David Nelms, my friend and colleague. Thank you so much for your time.