

THE CHURCH PLANTING PODCAST

with Greg Nettle



Greg N: Hey friends. This is an episode of The Church Planting Podcast that you do not want to miss. My friend, Greg Lee is joining us. Greg has served Suncrest Christian Church in suburban Chicago, Northwest Indiana for 25 years. Their fundamental vision of the church is to impact 1 million people by 2034, by starting and multiplying new churches. We're gonna learn a ton together with Greg. Well, I'm really excited to have my friend and Stadia partner, church planting extraordinaire Greg Lee on The Church Planting Podcast on this episode. Greg, welcome to the podcast!

Greg L: Thanks Greg. Awesome to be here. Love church planting. Of course.

Greg N: So, you've been at the same church in Indiana for 25 years. You're the senior visionary leader now. Is, is that the role you've always been in talk a little bit about that 25 years...

Greg L: Yeah, so Suncrest is almost 28 years old. A founding pastor was John Wasem. Who of course has lots of connection with Stadia in the church planting world. And the truth is I worked under John for seven years. And then have been the lead pastor for about 18 years or so. And this has been, you know, kind of the journey of my life. I thought I'm not sure whether I'm gonna work under John and then leave to plant a church or if I'm gonna work under John and then, you know, stay here so that Suncrest can be the church planning church it needs to be, and it's turned out this way in some pretty wonderful ways.

Greg N: So for those of us who know John Wasem, John is, I mean, he's been involved in church planning forever. He is a church planter. He's he is actually finishing up. He's retiring, I believe at the end of this year from Stadia, but yeah, such an essential part of the church planting world. Talk about that DNA. He kind of instilled in Suncrest. And then how that's, I mean, you've just kind of taken that and blown it up and expanded it.

Greg L: Yeah. I mean, that, that is the story, right? So I was, when I, you know, graduated from undergrad and came to Suncrest, I was 21 years old and I literally thought I need to work under someone. And if you know, John, you know, he was the perfect choice to, to work under. And he did, he mentored me and he mentored our church from those earliest stages to. Hey, we are a church plant. We've benefited from others, investing in us. We're going to turn that right around and be a church planting church. So the DNA was embedded at Suncrest from John. And like you say, you know, there, there, anytime there's a leadership transition, of course there's some things I thought, oh, well, I'm gonna do this differently. We're gonna lead in a new direction. But the church planting DNA, it was just like, that is who we are. That's who I have. So just stuck with that.

Greg N: Okay. So the, the, you know, the latest statistics that have come out are that somewhere between eight and 10% of churches in the United States right now are involved in any type of church multiplication. And unfortunately only about 2% of churches in the United States are directly involved in church planting, where they're sending someone or, you know, intentionally raising leaders up to send. That is not the case at Suncrest. You guys are kind of the poster child of what, you know, healthy church multiplication looks like. Talk a little bit about what's going on at sun crest without right now. And then we're gonna talk about

Greg L: your vision for the future. Okay. Yeah. So well it, you know, it's hard not to talk about the vision for, for where we are right now, but. Suncrest, you know, just has this desire that, you know, whatever we're trying to do in a single person, a disciple, that's what we should be doing. Churchwide

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right. So discipleship growth multiplication is absolutely at the core of that. We want, you know, every person here to have a transformational experience become an outward oriented person who reaches more. And we think that's what a church should be. So it's just almost instinctive for us that at a leadership level, you know, we're raising up people having in mind that, oh, you could be sent out to start a new church. Of course you could be, you know, become a leader here locally, but it's all a kingdom investment, not just a local church investment. Okay.

Greg N: I've gotta come back to that statement. So church multiplication simply reflects. What you're teaching individual. Discipleships speak a little bit more to that. How, how, what, what do you see as the benefit there with how does church multiplication benefit the discipleship mindset?

Greg L: I think sometimes churches get inconsistent between what they're doing with individuals, maybe what they're doing with leaders and what they're doing with church planting. And when you stay consistent, then it just makes sense to everyone. Right. So, you know, What are, what are some of the values around raising up a disciple? We're we're trying to help people trust God. That's, that's the first decision to trust God with your faith and then keep trusting God. Well, when it comes to leadership, then, you know, there's always that sense of like, oh, I, I just have a group of people I'm leading. You're like, no, we're leading somewhere, somewhere that we couldn't do on our own. We're gonna trust God. What's a church doing as a whole. Well, we're gonna create a vision that trusts God that isn't something we can just calculate for our. So, you know, that's one principle take, take another one contributing by serving like Jesus didn't come, you know, to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom. Well, that's an individual disciple. That's what our leaders ought to do. And collectively as a church, I, of course, it's easier when. It's almost that when we were young and poor and small, you know, you could risk anything like, well, if it doesn't work out, you, we didn't lose much. You get a little larger, you know, you get, you get a little more resources you get, you know, and I feel people tending to pull back from the risk, right. Or, or even pull back from saying, we're going for it. There's a, we're serving that we're outward. We're not protecting our. And so all, all of those things that we're trying to develop in a single person, we just think that works all the way through the system. So

Greg N: when, when you're younger, I mean, you're struggling financially just to make it as a church plant and, and everybody relates to that that's planted. But it doesn't really get any easier. Right, Greg? I mean, then you grow to 400 or 800 or even much larger. And, and now you, you have more debt, you have more staff that you're responsible for, but talk about the generosity factor and how that's played out

Greg L: at Suncrest when Suncrest began, John Washam, you know, put this vision in that from the very beginning, you know, 10% of all of our offerings, we're going to go to church planting. You know, that was, that was just the DNA from the beginning. And one of the ways I tell the story. You know, it took us seven years before we were able to be a serious partner in our first church plant. Right? In the next seven years, we were able to be a serious partner in seven church plants. You know, last year in one year, we were able to be a serious partner in seven church plants. It just scales for us, but it would've, you know, you don't get to hear without those first seven years saying, this is what we're gonna do. One of the visions John cast was to say, you know, we were meeting in a high school. We did that for seven years, ourself. In some ways we were just conserving resources. So we could be generous to others. But John cast this vision to say, before we ever move into our own. We will be a major partner in starting a new church. Wow. And so, you know, I benefit from that because you know, it was embedded or I, I didn't have to change the mindset of our church. I just built on

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something else. But I tell people all the time, you can't, you know, you can't think, oh, five years from now, 10 years from now, when we have more than we'll be involved, it, you won't. Okay.

Greg N: So. We're talk, we've talked about John's vision, but man, when I read your vision I was pretty blown away. And of course we've, we've discussed it personally and stuff, but talk about the vision now. I think you have a vision for 2034 the year and give us an update.

Greg L: Yeah. Yeah. Let me tell you the story a little bit. So. the vision is that sun crest would impact 1 million people by the year 2034, by starting and multiplying new churches. That's, that's the vision. That is the primary vision of our church. So, you know, if you're an average attender at sun crest, you know, our mission and you know that vision. And let me give you where that came from. Obviously all the DNA had been placed in us from John. I was really fortunate early on in my leadership years here to hang around new thing network. Yeah. Dave Ferguson, And I was in a meeting, just a small meeting with Dave years ago and he was casting this vision to impact 1 billion people. Right. And I sat there and I thought that's too big for me, honestly, but I thought I'll take a million out of the billion. I'll take one. and, but the truth is, as you know, as a leader, like God stirs something in your heart, but maybe you're not quite ready to say it out loud. Right. And you're like, that's, that's a big thing. The moment I say it out loud, I'm gonna be accountable for it. So I held that inside of me for two or three years, talked to a couple close friends about it. And then we are actually on a retreat with our elders from Suncrest and they, one of 'em asked me, I said, well, Greg, what's the dream? What's the dream. I said, well, do you wanna know what the dream is? I I'm not saying this out loud, like I've told, I've told my wife and a good friend, but I think it's Suncrest 1 million people by our 40th anniversary. Okay. It's and you know, within 15 minutes, the elders were like, Greg, that's it. That's it. That's what our church should be focused on. It's clearly in your heart. We all resonate with that. Why wouldn't we name it that way? So from that retreat on, we just crystallized that this is who we are. We're church planning, church with vision to impact 1 million people. I tell people all the time, it's a serious number. You know, you can say 1 million or 1 billion and people would be like, ah, whatever, you know, roll your eyes back. And I, so I just remind people, no, we're counting it. We, we call every new church. We've started every two or three years. We ask them what churches have you started? We ask those churches, what churches have you started? And, you know, at this stage we've been doing it for a while. So, you know, we have churches that have started churches that have started churches that have started churches that have started churches eight generations down. Wow. And you know, the word exponential, you know, is used in church planning all the time, but it's just, it's what we're doing. Right. You don't get to 1 million by starting 65 churches. You get to 1 million by starting 65 churches that collectively have multiplied over a thousand churches. And we're on course. And I tell, just told our leaders this, you know, a few weeks ago, you know, actually not to make the vision sound too small, but we're on course to hit about 1.3 or 1.4 million by 2034.

Greg N: So I, this just warms my heart. You know, how excited I am about this and. It's all about multiplication. You can't do it by just adding people. You have to multiply. And that's what you're saying. Yep. And, and so Greg, I, my hunch is you're just gonna blow that number out of the water. And it, it's just such an exciting vision. Now, is this all us? Is this global talk about that. What's going on with church planting?

Greg L: Yeah. Great question. So we definitely at this stage, see it as a portfolio of church plant. Yeah. So it is us, it is international. It is a range of socioeconomic situations. So there are some church plants where we are a six-figure investor. Right. And there are some church plants in where we can, I mean, genuinely, it's almost like we can buy someone, a motorcycle and we plant new church. Absolutely. I know.

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Greg N: Yeah, it's crazy. Yeah. But, but. We do it all.

Greg L: And I, I have a lot of conviction around this because you know, some people might say, oh, go try to reach the hardest places you have resources. Now do that. I'm like, I wanna do that. Some people say, oh, well, if you can plant a church with a motorbike, why not just keep doing that? And I just remind people, you know, sun crest is a suburban church. Plant people, put resources into us when we plant it. I think at that stage, it cost 200, \$300,000 of outside support to plant the church. You know, these days, of course we've given millions and millions of dollars away. And I think we have to do all of that. If, if we only plant churches in India in those smaller settings or Liberia Africa, kind of two major places for us, you know, those churches aren't going to resource the next generation of churches. Correct. Right. The way suburban church plant might. But we have to do it all. So I think portfolio. Okay. I love the portfolio idea.

Greg N: And so great. Let's talk a little bit about, because you are talking about different price points. And I think about all of our church planters listening now, or let's say you're a pastor of, you know, the average size church in, in the United States that has 70 to a hundred people in it. And I, I just keep thinking to. If, if we could just mobilize tho that group of churches to, to plant a church. But I think, you know, I remember back when we, we were launching and, and we're thinking how we don't have those. We don't. \$87,000 to plant a church in, in, you know, south America, or we don't have \$50,000 to help plant a church in San Francisco. But, but there are different price points. Speak to that a little bit about how maybe younger churches or smaller churches could get involved in multiplication.

Greg L: Yeah. So I have two major ways I think about that. One is that it is okay. You know, like if you're committing 10% of your budget or something like. It's okay to store that up over a year or two or three years so that you can make a larger impact. Right. But no one should think, unless I have \$50,000, I can't really help. That is not the story. So one of, one of my favorite things to do, because I want to multiply new churches is, you know, to say, oh, here's a project out here. We did this with stadia actually in Myanmar, I think yes, there was a project that cost, I think it was around \$30,000. Yes. And we said, To one of our new churches, good news church in Ohio is a stadia church plant. We want, we want to help them get in the church planting game, right? So we say to them, Hey, we'll do \$28,000. You do \$2,000 and together sun crest and good news are gonna plant this church wow. In this area. So. So I, I encourage to think like, that's that obviously Suncrest is coming alongside in a major way, which by the way, we would do with , you know, churches that are listening to this podcast, if it helps you get in the game, let's do this together. Yeah. Right. Because what's gonna happen is at good news church, they're going to, you know, cast this vision for church planning. They're gonna tell the story of a new church that gets started. Their people are going to be excited about it, and we wanna help people get in the game. Even if, you know, if your investment. You know, hundreds or a few thousand, rather than tens of thousands.

Greg N: I love that you come alongside churches and invest in that. In that way. I, I tell the planters and smaller churches all the time. I. You know, if, if you wanna partner with stadia, we can plant churches. I, I was just in Nepal for a few weeks and I, I got to attend a graduation class of 60 church planters going out to plant, you know, what it costs to plant a church in Nepal. Yes. It's about \$350 per church, Greg. And I'm like, any church can afford that. Right. You know, you move into India where, you know, you're looking at like a \$6,000 price point and lots of churches can do \$6,000. You know, and, and then you can partner to plant a church in the us or in other more expensive areas to become a resource church. So I love that you're doing that. Greg, let me come back now. I, you know, the, this, this value of children because, you know, stadia is committed to making sure every child has a

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church to help start thriving, growing, multiplying churches for the next generation. And I know you personally, your family, you're very committed to that. Can you, can you talk a little bit about that? .

Greg L: Yeah. I, I always feel like when I talk about this, that I should give credit where it's due, which is my wife. Right. Always. But yeah, about about five years ago, my wife came home and said, Hey, honey have you ever thought about, you know, adopting three little girls. And I said, no, actually I have no once she said, well, I think God's leading us to that. And it's a long story. We did not end up with the three little girls that got originally placed on our heart, but it did get us close to the system and saw the need for children to have homes. And, you know, Greg, this intersects with church planning a lot for me. I do think one of the, one of the mistakes church planting churches make is we cast a vision for church planting, but we, we actually cast a vision for starting worship services. Right? So like sun crest, when I, when I cast a vision for church planting, if they only think we're starting worship services somewhere, that's not that inspiring to them. Right. But just as sun crest and individuals at sun crest are involved in changing the world and being called to being foster parents like we have, and, and. That's what we're doing. We're starting churches that make an kingdom impact where they are, where they're changing the world, where they are with children. Right. So, yeah, so God placed that on our heart. And, you know, we ended up having a teenager. We fostered, we adopted him, you know, as our son, he's now in the United States Marines, very proud of him. And then another long story, but we, we were fostering another teenager who had a little baby. Unfortunately it didn't work out with a teenager. But we were left with the baby. He's now three years old. Our adoption of him should be official next month. And God has just done, you know, amazing things in our hearts through that. And, and you

Greg N: have two biological children as well. So and, and you're leading, you know, a large church multiplication reaching a million people. You know, how, how do you have the, in all seriousness? Because a lot of people, a lot of leaders are out there and they're going, man, that sounds really. But how do I have the time to, to do that and fit? Can, can you speak to, what would you say to them?

Greg L: I, I don't know, maybe I'm unique in this way, but I've never felt like I had enough time to do anything, which means that can't be the barrier , you know what, whatever that is, you know, we, we kind of figure it out. Certainly you have to have margin at certain points in your life. You know, I know you and I kinda share this rhythm in the summer. Stepping back and taking a break to reset for what's next. I'm a big believer in Sabbath, rhythms agree and things like that. But you know, on, on the whole, you know, I think one of the things we're constantly push, one of the things an American pastor has to push against and model against is the consumer culture, right. That there's an orientation to. That it is about me. And it's about my comfort. And it's about, you know, like the dream is somehow to retire, you know, and golf and fish and do nothing of consequence. Listen, I love golfing. Right. I, I love that stuff, but we, we have to just keep going all in every chance we get, you know, when God leads us to something. So it's not a strategy as much as it is a conviction. Yeah. You know, say,

Greg N: yes, I appreciate that, Greg. When my, you know, my wife and I have been on the same journey, you're on foster adoption. man. It's just been one of the biggest blessings in our life, in, in how it's transformed us in, in so many ways. And we came to the realization at one point, somebody was talking about your empty nest years. And we said, you know what we are, if we have empty nest years, they're gonna be really short. And, and, and you just have to, you know, you go, well, are you convicted about this? Is it a priority that, you know, every child matters every person matters. The next generation is the future of the church today. So, you know, it's really about those priorities. So you stayed at Suncrest 25 years, man. And we have lots of church leaders and planners listening time

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to about stating somewhere for 20. I know you've had offers. I know, you know, you, you you've had thoughts you know, but talk about some of the advantages and, and how you've stayed

Greg L: 25 years. Yeah. , I, I don't say this flippantly. It is God's goodness to me. You know, I, I can rewind this all the way back to when I was a teenager and feeling this call to ministry. I grew up in a small church in a rural area and the ministers moved. It seemed like every three or five years. And the, the, the biggest hesitation I had about going into ministry was like, oh, it means I'm gonna have to move my family. Yeah. All the time. That was my picture of it. Yeah. and I had a few mentors in my life say, no, there's a different picture. You can do it a different way. And so, you know, my wife and I just had a lot of conviction that we're gonna go somewhere and stay, and we're gonna build something over time, in some ways it's my personality, right? I'm not, I'm not the flashiest. I'm not, that's not me. I'm just a solid steady. When I tell people the story of Suncrest growth, you know, it's not that one year we grew 70%. That's never happened. It's just, you know, 5%, 10%, 15% every year over time. It's how we're gonna do church planning. We're gonna put in a 20 year vision for church planning. We're gonna watch it and, and just keep working the system work the plan to prioritize it. So, you know, I love, I think I'm a good fit for where we are. You know, I know this is a public podcast. I, I have had offers to go other places. I usually just dismiss them immediately. Right. Just like it's not. And, and even the one time I was serious about pursuing something. You know, in the end, my, this is honestly, maybe this is helpful for staying a long time in the end. My sense was, well, I could go somewhere, you know, that's much bigger than we are now with a bigger budget and resources, or I could just do all the things I start to dream about in that place here. Wow. Because I, at that stage had, you know, 15 years of credibility here, you know, and of course, you know, integrity matters. You know, you gotta, you don't stay one place if you can't, you know, love people well and, and be selfless and, you know, stay, stay on the rails with your personal morality, all those things. But man, the, the benefits are so strong. And Greg, one of, one of the things I always want to tell, you know, maybe your church planters, but especially pastors of churches watching this is I think sometimes the perception about being a church planning church might be. Like, oh, people are gonna think we're giving our resources away. Like maybe it's not good. You, one of the benefits of staying somewhere 25 years is you make relationships that become major donors yeah. In your church, right. That people who trust you over time. And I know the generosity of our church has increased because we cast the vision for impacting 1 million. Right. And, and I don't think you can show up in your first year cast that vision and have people resource that. Yeah. I think you have to stay a little while, build that credibility, but then they also have a vision that's so far beyond just, you know, reaching thousands here. It's like, wow. What if you could be a part of reaching a million.

Greg N: So Greg, let me, I wholeheartedly agree to that. You know, I was at Rivertree for 25 years as the senior pastor, before moving to Stadia. Yeah. Never thought I'd leave Rivertree. But God really did call me to stadia, but I gotta tell you a story that just happened. Just in the last couple weeks, I, I had a family email me and say, We were at river tree 15 years ago, and we loved the vision of multiplication and, and, and, you know, and, and we were heavily involved in church planting like you, you were, and we came up to you after a service one day, Greg. And we said, one day, we're gonna plant a church ourselves. And so they were emailing me. And so I get on a zoom call with them and, and I remember them once I'm on the zoom call and I see 'em and they just got an inheritance of, of \$2 million. And said they wanted to tithe. And so could, what would our \$200,000 do in church plant? And so, you know, I said, well, it would help stadia start eight churches, you know, in the United States, or it could start, you know, X number of churches in Nepal, or here's an, and it was so fun, but back to your original point, that was the fruit from 15 years ago. And, and that it took, you know, so you never know those seeds that are being planted and developing people like that, what God's doing in their hearts. So I so appreciate what you're. So Greg, if people let's just say they're let's as we kind of wrap up here, people are, our leaders are out there. They're in church plants, they in, in, in

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churches right now, if they wanna get this kind of vision of multiplication started in the church and, and it's ground level, give them just a couple, you know, 1, 2, 3 things that you'd say, Hey, here is the first couple steps you want to take.

Greg L: Well, I don't think anything's more important than finding a quality project to partner on. That is going to be an early win. Yes, yes. For you. Yes. Right. So you know, you can sit around in meetings and talk about it and you should they let people see your heart and, and, and how exponential really works, but finding that first partner and having a sense that, you know, listen, I, church planters are my heroes and there are no slam dunks. Right? Like it, it projects are hard and these are tests of faith. But if you could find a project early on that, that you think, yeah, this could go and then you form a relationship with that church planter. Right. So I just, you know, I'm taking some time off this summer from preaching, right. Guests who our guest speakers are. It's all of our church planters. Right. I, I bring them in they're guest speakers and sun. Fantastic. I want Suncrest to know them, to see them right. To hear their story, to, to hear them say thank you to sun crest. Right. And yeah, I'm doing that with four people this summer, but you just have to have. You have to have, you have to have a project and a leader who resonates with your leadership, your church, and you, it really is a relationship. And I think if you get the, the first one in place, and then, you know, a few years later that church is starting a new church and you get to tell that story again, that that is ground level. Find that first project that's a win and do what you can, right. Again, major partner, you know, almost everyone starts as a minor partner. And then you grow up to those major partners.

Greg N: Greg Lee Suncrest Christian Church million people by 2034, which they're gonna blow out of the water. Greg. I'm so grateful for you as a friend and as a partner. Thanks for being on The Church Planting Podcast.

Greg L: Hey, happy to do it. Love you, Greg. And love what Stadia is.