

# THE CHURCH PLANTING PODCAST

with Greg Nettle



**Greg:** Hey friends, Greg Nettle here. I serve as President of Stadia Church Planting, where our goal is to help you start thousands of thriving, growing, multiplying churches for the next generation. I've been really excited about this episode. My good friend Alan Ahlgrim is my guest. And we've known each other for years and years in the church world. Alan is now leveraging the agony of 50 years of ministry. Although he retired from being a senior pastor, founding pastor of Rocky Mountain Christian Church in Colorado, he now continues his work in Soul Care. He has a brand new book out called Soul Strength. We're gonna be talking about that, but we're gonna learn a ton from my friend Allen Ahlgrim. Let's jump right into this episode. So I'm here with my good friend Alan, a welcome, delighted to have you on the church planning podcast.

**Alan:** It's an absolute delight. Great to be with you, Greg.

**Greg:** Alan, your, So you, your book just was released not too long ago. Soul Strength Rhythms for Thriving. And I've been watching, well, I, I've known you for a long time. As a colleague as someone I looked forward, you know, looked up to and still do, just a little bit ahead of me in the journey along your ministry journey. And, and since you've transitioned from being a senior pastor of a thriving growing church, multiplying church, watching you pour into leaders, and that was one of the reasons that I wanted to have you on the podcast, was this idea of now as watching you pour into young leaders and, and some older leaders, and, you know, through your book pouring into me let's talk your, your opening chapter is Embrace Your Story. So let's talk about that a little bit. Your story. What, what brought you to this point and, and writing the book and doing what you're doing now?

**Alan:** Well it really wasn't my idea to write the book. I was agitated into doing it. I never intended to write the book. Many, many people have encouraged me to do that over the years, but I have, I hear the voice of God. Through his word primarily. And secondarily through the voices of others, especially the woman I currently live with, actually 54 years now, . But in this case it was a soul care group that said, You have got to write this down. And I said, Well, you guys were supposed to be taking notes. I was, and, and I, I didn't realize it, but later they said, No, no, you were agitated.

I said, Well, no, no, you were agitated. They disturbed me into doing this and I'm grateful to have done this last year came out in January of 20. .

**Greg:** Yeah. So the, the agitated to write the book, and I'm so glad they, they disturbed you to do that, but to be able to write that book give us kind of your story a little bit that you reveal in the book, but senior pastor and then to where you are now.

**Alan:** Well I Received a, a strong sense of call when I was 15 years of age at church camp. I just knew it would never be preaching, but one thing led to another and lo and behold, people actually would listen to me. I thought initially I would go into pastoral care and counseling and serve as a child in the military and so on and then open a counseling center of some sort. Now, that never happened. I end up in growing churches, and that always

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surprised me. And because of that, I had growing influence with a large network, both those serving large churches and new church planting, which has been near and dear to my heart. Again, I'd never intended to do that. Just nobody would hire me. And , I ended up starting a church. I'm from Chicago and I ended up starting a church in Columbia, South Carolina. At that point, I thought the only Columbia I knew was in South America. Yeah. But I was called to start a church. There was seven years there. Then I went to a larger church in Cincinnati. It was a turnaround situation for them. And then as things have unfolded I developed friendships far and wide. One of the most so enriching had has been for me Dr. John Walker John and I, and I know you know him well, Greg Yeah. Do,

**Greg:** Yes. He's counseled him many times. .

**Alan:** Yeah. Well I had the opportunity of having a so enriching collegial partnership with him for, oh, say 20 years. Almost every week we. And it was what he called the intentional collegiality. You don't think of PhDs psychologist to come up with that. And it, I, he poured into me and I, he says I influenced him and well, well, that's his story, but. As that has unfolded, I ended up working with Dr. John Walker and his daughter, Dr. Charity Buyers for about five years and partnered up with them in expanding their ministry. Then I worked with another group with Tim, only for in Cincinnati for AUSE. And then I launched Covenant Connections and that has produced amazing. Opportunities. I'm so grateful that I get to invest. I influence influencers and I am now really focused on mentoring multipliers. So I'm, I'm helping leaders to connect head in heart in, in an uncommon. And I'm always surprised at first I wondered if it was just some unique this I had, but now I have learned that following a model, a template that has evolved from me, that others are having amazing results as well. So I'm not the secret sauce.

**Greg:** Let's go into that a little bit. So Covenant Connections and you, you, in, in your book, you talk about, you know, choose your circles, cultivate strong relationships. And that's really at the heart of covenant, you know, covenant connections and, you know, Soul Strength Rhythms for Thriving. So talk about that, what that looks like. And if, so, we're talking to a lot of church planners, many of them younger, some of them not so young. You know, what, what wisdom would you impart to them here?

**Alan:** Well, there's no better time to start than now. A lot of people had said, Well, you know, when I retire, I'd like to be able to do what you're doing. And I, my retort, I don't mean to be snarky about it, but if you're not doing it now, you don't, you won't do it then. I haven't changed anything. I accept I get to do more of the life enriching things now because the demands of leading a large multi-campus ministry and traveling and so on. I, I, I couldn't have the freedom. I didn't have the freedom to do all that I'm doing now. But I always did some of this and I believe that I don't any longer use terms like goals and habits. Seems owners to me, but rather rhythms, and we're familiar with the business statement that your systems are perfectly designed to get you what you're getting. I'd like to say your rhythms are perfectly designed to get you what you're getting, and your life is no richer than your rhythms. Certainly reflective rhythms that's reading and reflecting on God's word and your relational rhythms. Your life will be no richer than your relationships and even recreational

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rhythm. So after this call, I'm, I'm gonna get on my bike before my next set of appointments for the. Yesterday I went to the gym. I was swimming. I were hiking all the time. We live in Colorado. Sorry about that. Greg. You I know . Yeah. You'd love to be about here now, but, so I'm doing these things that I've been doing for decades. I'm 75 and I, I look at this now and I, there's a pretty good shot. I'll have another 25 years left. I've started the last quarter, you know but if not, , I know what I'm doing now. This is a great day. I'm excited about this day. This is the day the Lord's made, and I'm gonna rejoice and be glad in it. And I just wanna help the younger leaders now who are so tired and so frustrated and frankly feeling so alone because depression is not, That's a co, that's a common word. People have been to being depressed, but they won't admit to as being. and that is really the root of

**Greg:** our, Okay, so I, you've just done, we gotta unpack so much of the rich stuff you just said, and you used a phrase the, you're only, you know, as rich as the rhythms of. You know, reflection, relationships, recreation. I, I wanna dive into this cuz the loneliness now we've all experienced that, you know, how important because we've shared so much life together, how important relationships are to meet personally, they've kept me in, in the game for the yes. But let's talk about that rhythms of relationships. These, these men and women really need to hear that. So unpack that a little. .

**Alan:** Well, first of all, I'm gonna commend you, Greg, because you eat your own cooking, and that's what I keep saying to leaders. Are you eating your own cooking? Because we have leaders near and far who are happy to talk to others about their need for community, but they're, they're relationally starving. They are technologically connected. They have all kinds of public influence, but they have no intimacy. And by that I mean into me, you see, they have no. since that others, anyone really knows them at their core and they're afraid of it, quite frankly, because they're afraid of being discovered to be lesser than someone else. When we get into a safe setting, we discover, Oh, we're not the only flawed person. We're not the only one who struggles with hidden hurts and heartaches. .

**Greg:** Yeah, so I mean, I, one of the phrases always used even when I'm speaking in, you know, large group gatherings, Ellen, is we're all a mess. And if, if ministry's taught me one thing over all the years, it's, it's that we're all a mess. And that's the whole point of needing God's grace and, and needing Jesus to, you know, to come alongside of us and to put us back together. And, and, and the more transparent I am with others. The more transparent they are with me. Absolutely. And so sharing those flaws, actually as you know, I, I always have kind of vulner vulnerability hangover when I am transparent and stuff. It's like after it I'm going, Ooh, oh, I, you know, and it's, it's cause it's scary, right? Until somebody walks up to you and says, Man, thanks for that. Can I share something I'm struggling with with you? Yes. Talk about so, but, but. Like, I don't, I don't, you know, bleed all over the platform, right? So I'm, I'm transparent with a small group of leaders that I really trust deeply and that we've shared life with. Talk, give, give some words of wisdom to our, our younger listeners. And, and honestly, I, I still think if you're in your forties, fifties, sixties, I still think it's all okay, how do I find these people and who should I trust? .

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**Alan:** Well years ago I was in a gathering of leaders of large churches down Colorado Springs. I didn't know anyone in the room. Probably 15, 20 all guys sitting there. And the topic was authenticity. And I said, I think authenticity comes at three levels. And immediately they lit up. You know how that goes when you say three to a bunch of pastors, they wanna write that down. And so I'd describe it like this. If you just picture a pyramid. and we'll call it the pyramid of authenticity. The base of it is honesty. So as Christians, certainly Christian leaders, we should be in the bad habit of telling people the truth. I mean, we just don't lie. All right? That's honesty. With all, we're not gonna intentionally deceive. Now we don't tell the whole truth, nothing but the truth to just anybody. But we don't deceive and I do believe that we should live without. Self protection or self-promotion. So this is honesty as a base. The next level up would be transparency. Early in my ministry, I got in trouble for using too many personal illustrations. Now, leaders get in trouble if they don't use personal illustrations. So transparency. I'll share some things. In fact, my recent speaking various congregations, I share some stories that wouldn't make any sense if I was asked by a greeter in a restaurant. How you doing? I, it was contextualized because of the scripture, because of sense of commonality in a Christian community. So it was, it's honesty with all, but then it's transparency with some. And then ultimately vulnerability with few and their levels of vulnerability. So in vulnerability, what I know is just as you described, if I jump into the deep end of the pool, others will as well. And it only takes one person to do that, as in a safe setting, and others will buckle up and do the same. Well mix the metaphors there, but . If we can understand that this isn't forced it, it's not required. I don't even use the term accountability. It sounds like the pastoral police. I just say we hold each other close. We, we could cycle back to topics that were lightly raised before. so often in a small group setting it could be pretty tender at times, and yet sometimes later there's a follow up that's just one on one. Again, it's not forced and that's I think the, a freeing thing where nobody feels like they're under obligation and there's no, there's not gonna be a spotlight on them. Well, what are your seven deepest, darkest sins? You know? What's the worst argument you ever had with your wife in. No, no, no. That's, that's not life giving. That's life draining.

**Greg:** Yeah. So I have three guys, as you know, that I've shared life with for about 20 years now, asking those questions,

**Alan:** and I know each of those guys well.

**Greg:** Yes. And, and, and they're not, you know, so it's, Are they, are we an accountability group? Yeah, but we've never called ourselves that. We're just friends who love each other. And so I feel safe to say, Hey, here's the struggle I'm going through, or Can you pray about this with, or, My wife and I are going through this, or this is what I'm going through with my son. And they do the same. And over the years as we've gotten to know each other, and Alan, interestingly enough, when we started meeting together, we didn't know each other very well. It was just kinda, you know, I approached Jim Harlow and said, Hey, I'm thinking, what do you think about starting this group? And I was thinking about asking Ben Eros and then Ben said, Why don't we invite Eddie Lowen? And then, and that's how, And then we got together for the first time and we spent a couple days together. Right. And so I think part of it is just you have to jump into it and commit to doing it, and then make the commitment. Now



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we, you know, we have to plan our schedules a year out to get together because everybody's so. Okay. I wanna shift gears now because you talked about the R rhythms of reflection. Yes. And that's the one I struggle with most personally. Just there's my true confession. Talk about what you mean by that.

**Alan:** Well, I'm an activist at heart and I have always been in the fast lane. And bothered that I didn't spend any con any time of consequence in a quote, a devotional life. And I made a vow, which I don't recommend anybody, but that I would, it changed my ways early as a church planter that I would spend it. I'm just embarrassed to say this, that I would spend five minutes a. , Yeah. Reading God's word, not increment preparation, but just five minutes now. I did that just to get myself started and years ago I started what many do reading a chapter proverbs every day that of corresponds with it with the date on the calendar. Well, I've done that for years. To me, it's just a way to get started. But then what's interesting is that what began out, frankly, a sense of duty. How can I have moral a. As a preacher, if I'm not reading God's word myself and listening to him through the word now, I crave it. I crave it. I would, I had a short night. I was up early this morning, and I wasn't frankly, if, if you will, preparing for this podcast. I, I was I was drinking deeply in God's word and reviewing things. I'm not only a slow learner I am a quick forgetter Greg. I have gotta keep going back and reviewing these things again and again. That fed my soul. And so I crave this. I, I crave reflection and I know that my life is, is never more well, the more reflective I am, the more effective I. Okay.

**Greg:** Don't lose that. The more reflective I am, the more effective. Okay. But Alan, I've gotta stop you there because I'm sure we've got, you know, listeners and viewers right now, church planters, and I've been there myself for sure, where I'm going. Well, I'm glad you craved that, Alan, but I sure don't. I've got a thousand things to do. I'm busy. I'm stressed. Yeah. I don't crave it. How do I, how do I get to the craving

**Alan:** point? Oh, I, I think there's some simple things that. For example, I, I do a lot of quote journaling, which terrifies some people because they, they, in fact, I talked to a doctor, just so they, he said, You know, I've actually had to go digital cause I can't even read my own handwriting. Now I can't. So what do you mean by journaling? Well, for me, I, I'm talking about bulletizing. So I learned something powerful for me just about nine years ago, that gratitude is really the gateway to joy. And if anybody had discovered my occasional journal entries prior, they able would've thought I needed to be institutionalized. So the, the discovery I made was. , those who re record gratitudes are not only the more grateful people, they are the ones who have the greatest emotional capacity to invest in others. So this is where I want to go right to the younger leaders to say, How can I continue to serve with some capacity of the fact of joy? It's so stink and. . Well, if you can record as I do five reasons for gratitude every day, just bullets, boom, boom, boom, boom. And that's, you know, cuddling with your wife. I we're spouse you know, it is having a great meal with a friend. It's walking your dog. It's having a soul enriching conversation. All of these things, if you'll do that, what I found. to be so amazing is that I go through, as you know from the book, the four Ds of delight, drain discovery, determination all the time. And I do it all the time and I do it every week. And I have a remarkable week, Greg. I can't remember the last

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time what I, and I've got documentation to when I didn't have a remarkable week. I can't believe I get to enjoy the things I get to enjoy, meet with the people I get to meet with, do the things I get to. I, I am the most unbelievably blessed person that you're gonna talk to today. Now, , that's, you can say that I don't have some challenges, of course, but they're overwhelmed by my gratitudes. And what I know is this, if I can go to bed with gratitudes in my head, I sleep better.

**Greg:** No, I agree with you. I just, So one of the thi I I, I go to sleep easily every night, Alan, and, and I sleep well. And as you know, we're in the ministry together and there's a lot of weight that comes with that and a lot of people that have trouble falling asleep and can't sleep well. But that's not, and I, I just wanna build on what you just said, and it, it's so rich the way I fall asleep at. Ellen is, I start off with, for me, it's just three things every day that I'm thankful for. I don't even go to five three and I list them in bed at night. Yes. And I'm falling asleep. So I, last night I remember I was thanking God for this hummingbird that flew to a flower right at my window that I got to watch for just a few seconds. And, and, and then I'm thanking God that my son, Elijah, we just moved into the city of Cleveland the first day of school this day. I said, Oh, Because I was begging for his life yesterday as he went to the first day of school at freshman in high school. Cool. He, he came home and he had a really good day. So I was, God, and I don't even know if I got to three, I fell asleep. But the next morning then, you know, I get my journal, Alan and I write down those three things each day. Yeah. That, But that's how I fall asleep and I sleep well. And tonight, I guarantee you, Alan, I'm gonna be thanking God for this podcast with you seriously. And. God, just, I'm so grateful for that time, short time I got spend with Alan and that he's blessing so many leaders. So I, I mean, I couldn't agree more on that reflection. And what a great first step, even if you're not a journaler to start just doing that gratitude three, five things a day that you're starting your day with.

**Alan:** Yeah. It will, well, all it will do is change your life for the better. That's all. And. You don't have to say, but I don't have an hour to do that. I was sitting at lunch with someone who was lamenting their inability, lack of time to journal. I said, Okay, well let, why don't we just do something right now? Grab a piece of paper, whatever you had there. I want you to write down, you know, 2, 3, 4 things He. Great. I said you just started. Yep. Now I'm talking. I'm not talking about five hours. I'm not talking about 50 minutes. I'm talking about five minutes. Yep. And if you get five minutes, You can do this. And I do believe that it's beneficial, just as you've discovered. And one thing to think these things, it's something else to write these things because it rewires our brain. I could tell you my brain has been rewired. So I believe that for example, for years, I would say when people said, What are you gonna write a book? And so, Well, if I did, it'd be maybe entitled. Leading while grieving or grieving while leading. And every leader goes, Whoa. Well, Greg, you know, some of my story and some of it I had to lead through, and now I realize that gratitude is the great greatest antidote to grief.

**Greg:** Okay. I just, because I wanna, I wanna talk about this last. The richness of, you know, your rhythms of recreation. And I noticed while you were you said, Well, yeah, so I, I'm going to the gym. I, I went, I, I bicycled and I'm going, Well, that's just exercise. That doesn't sound

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like recreation to me. Until you got to hiking and you know how much I love hiking and, Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So talk about that a little bit. What you mean by rhythm of, of.

**Alan:** I, this varies. A lot of people have some health challenges. I wanna stay in motion and in fact, the reason in part that I could do all that I do, I've never a great athlete like you or, you know Yeah, yeah. In the day, but, , I've always been active and I wanna continue to be active. Therefore I'm active. So I do these things. I don't, I, I'm in a, a crazy thing at a, at, at the Gold Gym there near, it's called Body Puppet. And basically it's a couple, three guys at the most in a class with a bunch of Uber fit young gals. And it's, I call it my humility class. Well, it's lighter weight, but it's constant repetition and you do this until your arms are gonna fall off. Okay? But I've had some shoulder issues cuz as you know, I played linebacker in the NFL for many years, you know Pro Bowl experience. Yeah. Right. And plus, you know, my experience with cer dule, I am unbelievable . Well I got, I've got some issues. Okay. I, and so I'm finding that motion is lotion. So I've got, recreation for me is not deadly weeks. It's not checkers, it's movement. It's good for my soul. For years when I could run before I messed up my knee. . I, I, I found that was some of my, my best prayer time as I was running. Now I don't run, but I I do all kinds of other things. Hiking, of course, snowshoeing bicycling And it's been good for me. I, in fact, I would say this, I'm in better shape now at 75 than I was at 65. And it's because I've had more, I got more time to do the things, but I always did some recreation. I, I don't know how I would've gotten through the stress of the stuff I carried if I had not been doing things recreationally.

**Greg:** So Island, one of the things, you know, sort a really practical level. It that, that I try to practice in, in the same way. So for me, you know, going to the gym, I, you know, I, I've had stretches where I've done that. I've had a personal trainer, I've done all those things, right? Yeah. I'm not wild about it. It's, it's hard for me to sustain that. But the one thing I can do regularly is just simply to walk. And here's, here's what I would say if I can walk three to five times a week and preferably five. At least it keeps me really recreated. And if you're married, the other thing I found yeah, there I walk with my, my goal is to walk with Julie at least three times a week. And that's, and that would be for two to three to four miles at a pop. Okay. Yes. And, and the benefits of that are, number one, I, if I'm walking by myself, I do spend, like you do a lot of time in prayer and kind of listening to. If I'm walking with Julie, we have these great conversations. Yes. And we'll pray together about some of those things that we're, we're talking about. And so it's relationally really healthy and then it's just movement like you said, and, and that's something that at Walking is something that virtually everyone can

**Alan:** do. Well, a neurosurgeon buddy of mine has been in a group of so care group at church with me because I've had some issues of various sorts of balance and knee issues and neck issues and stuff. He says, you know, walking is the best thing for you to do well for us walking is a given. We have a dog. In fact, they say if your dog is overweight, you're not getting enough exercise. So so we walk. Molly Brown, the dog renowned this Labradoodle, and that re, I mean, she requires activity like an hour a day, but interestingly, we don't even now consider an hour a day of walking Molly to be exercised because it as, it's like, well, I don't know. We just do that. But we do classes of various kinds and, and the other activities,

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but in part we don't live in the south and I just. Down in Savannah, but I got family down there and my close friend, as you know down there. And it, you know, we don't have to live with the humidity that some do or the the challenges of living in a city as you are. We have a a, but there are places you can go, anywhere you can, you can find a place to, to move. And it's essential that you, that you, you look for that, you take initiative, you have the responsibility. There's nobody that's gonna lead you but you. The hardest person for me to lead is to lead me. All right? I have to lead me so quick. Complain about what you don't have. Look for the opportunities that you do have. You can do something and something is better than nothing.

**Greg:** So the rhythms of, of recreation, the rhythms of relationship, and the reli rhythms of reflection. Alan, thank you so much. The book is Sole Strength Rhythms for Thriving. You can pick that up on Amazon. Or wherever great books are sold, and encourage you to get that. Alan, thank you so much for, for your time and your insights and wisdom.

**Alan:** I'm grateful. Blessings on you, Greg.