

FRIDAY NIGHT AT THE PUB

A Low Key, Long Term, Relational Church Planting Strategy through Gospel Communities

by Jack De Vries with Rod McWilliams



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Rod Mc Williams has been partnering with Redlands CRC in gathering a community committed to reaching the lost for Christ. Jack De Vries caught up with Rod at a café in Wellington Point across the road from Hogan’s Hotel, a key meeting place for this Christian community. In this interview Rod explains what it means to reach the unchurched through community.

Jack De Vries: So here we are in Wellington Point; this is the nucleus where you are doing the church planting. Part of God’s country here.

Rod McWilliams: Yes, it is beautiful here.

JDV: So why church planting? What got you into church planting?

RM: I don’t know if I got into church planting as such. It was more that I had a real desire to reach out to unbelievers because I was once one of them. I came to know Christ when I was 28. Over the years I’ve had plenty of time invested in me by many Christians. I was without a church background so obviously they were helpful people who cared enough to go out of the church building to share the gospel with me. More than anything I suppose, just to be a friend, initially. So that has always been my heart from the beginning. But it never really came into

We believe the community that we have is the greatest expression, the greatest apologetic we could possibly have.

fruition until I moved to Queensland in the early 90’s from Victoria. When I came up here my wife Cheryl and I actively sought out opportunities to be involved in churches that did that, that were doing it in the active sense of mission, engaging in the community in a more relational way, rather than just having events, standing on a street corner, or such. I have some experience with all of that, but I always found that it had limited impact in the long term. So initially I really started looking for people who were doing this around the country but sadly I couldn’t really find anyone. This probably says more about my inability to look in the right places than anything else. So I looked overseas where I got a lot of information sent to me from the USA from some organisations who were planting churches and doing it in a way where they got really involved in the community they were in. They had the mentality of planting churches in their local context as if they were going overseas as missionaries. So they treated the areas where they were going locally to as mission fields.



Wellington Point, Queensland

JDV: So which organisations did you sense were doing that?

RM: Sovereign Grace Ministries who are in Washington, DC and Redeemer in New York City (they were the ones that was I looking at initially); then afterwards, about six or seven years ago, I got in touch with Acts 29 in Seattle (Mark Driscoll), and then Crowded House in Sheffield in the United Kingdom who have helped very much in these last two years. I've have kept in touch with what these groups do and each time I get in touch they help to piece together a bit more of the puzzle, the kind things we feel God is leading us to. We have not just copied what other people have done though, but we have taken pieces, and tried to fit it into the context of where we live. Many of these



churches and mission organisations are focused in urban areas. We are not urban. And many of their strategies work well in an urban situation, but it's a little different in the suburbs. So a lot of stuff I

have picked up from Crowded House in particular works very well, because even though they are urban, in Sheffield, it still translates very well where we are because of the nature of what they do.

JDV: I want to talk about strategy, but what was it about Redlands that said to you: "Well, this is perhaps a church we could link up with"?

RM: I've got to give you some history I suppose. I have been in Brisbane since the early 90's. When Cheryl and I got up here we were pretty certain of what we wanted to do, when it came to the kind of churches we wanted to be involved in. We had a couple of "interesting" experiences in Melbourne, and really wanted to steer clear of most it and not get involved in all the politics and shenanigans that goes on in so many churches. We looked for a few months and found a church that was outside of the denominational system at that time. The group we hooked up with were very much into what I would call a "house church style" but in a different manner to how we now understand the organic house church thing of the ten years or so. It was really good to begin with, but over time it became a little like the "frog in the saucepan of hot water thing"; we didn't realise how bad it was becoming, but after a time (and we were in it for ten years) we started to think, "This is really getting bad, there are a lot of poor things going on here." Doctrinally I did not agree with them anymore. They seemed to change doctrinal positions as often as they had breakfast. And so for me, that was strange. God had really given me a love for Reformed doctrine. I struggled with a few people within that group over key theological issues. But it was a

conviction I had. So we started to look at why we had to get out of there and just what we wanted to be involved in. God had given me a desire to go back to the mainstream church and just see what He was doing there. And of course, Redlands, it is in the name. It is a Reformed church. I went there, and it's been a great place to go. We and a number of our friends who were involved in the place where we were at previously went there for recovery, recovering from the bad experiences, and they are still attending there. It has been a wonderful place for them to recover from the situations they had been involved in, the struggles they had during that other church experience. But very soon after I came to Redlands we pretty much got together with Clinton (I came almost the same time Clinton [Berends] did, a month or two after), and talked a lot about what I was really keen on and I guess it all evolved from there. Clinton more than anyone has been the person I have done most of the dreaming of this stuff with. We have spent quite a bit of time thinking about how this might all come together.



Hogan's Hotel, Wellington Point

RM: Basically it is a strategy which involves gathering people around the gospel and community. It is not a written down strategy at this point of time. I was running a small group at the church, and I just thought that it needed to be more than what we had there. So I said to the people in the small group: "Look, I want to press this beyond these four walls, I want to get involved in our community, meeting in the places where we and our

neighbours live and not just inside these four walls: I really want to see the gospel impact their lives." Another thing I realised early on is that you cannot assume that all the people that go to church know about the gospel. I found that this could be a dangerous assumption to make. So I just decided with

the group that I had that I would go right back to the basics, laying down a solid gospel foundation. Then as we started to meet outside, we noticed other people coming along. We hang out at the pub right over there, Hogan's Hotel. It's become a wonderful place for people to bring their unchurched or unbelieving friends to interact with the group.

I have also been running a teaching night on Tuesdays. It's conducted in a dialogical fashion where people come along, hear the gospel taught, ask all the questions they like, agree or disagree; it is an open forum for people to challenge the group (and me too) with some of the

The responsibility for a person's salvation is God's; our responsibility is simply to live out the life he has given us, live it out as a display.

JDV: So what is your strategy?

things they struggle with, their belief in God.

JDV: So are these the people who would just come or are these the key leaders in your group?

RM: No, these are just the people who come. But we made it pretty clear, or I made it very clear to the people who had been coming to church all their lives, that if they had questions that they had no answers for, that this might be a place to get some of them sorted out. This has opened up some cool opportunities for people to work through some issues. I decided to take them on a bit of journey through the whole Bible from beginning to end and go through the whole creation, fall, redemption, restoration process to give them a deeper understanding about the bible as the story of God and to give them a biblical grounding and worldview to help show them where they fit into this story. So this has been part of the methodology we use, but the grand strategy (if you can call it that) of it all is simply to build gospel driven community with the group, embedding it deep into their daily lives, and to share that with the people who they normally interact with on a daily basis. So it's the people in the coffee shops we are building relationships with. The people in the pub, the wait staff, the chefs, and the bar tenders; we're starting to get their names, we walk in and people know us by name. It is very slow, but as the Crowded House folk would say, it is "long term, low key, and it is relational". So the idea is that as you build friendships, build relationships, start to drive that deeper, people get an opportunity to see how you live, see the way you communicate with one another, see how you deal with your own struggles.

They observe Christians in a way that is more comfortable for them. And we also get an opportunity to live out the gospel in a way that will be beneficial to us as well.

JDV: So how does that work itself out in Hogan's Hotel? Do you have a room, or do you meet in an open area? Do you do the teachings there?

RM: No, we just go in there and have a meal together. We don't run a meeting of any kind there. We don't do the teaching there. We just eat food and enjoy a few drinks. It is just a meeting point. But it's what has happened in those places. We have some people coming now who have not been to church in decades who now consider Friday night at the pub their night. We have prayed for them for weeks beforehand hoping that they would come; it's a bit of a miracle really. We have a prayer meeting every Wednesday



night – all we do is pray, at our house or someone else's house. So what we then do is say: "Invite people into a non-threatening area" – in Wellington Point, that place is the pub; that is where people go. We found that, particularly these people I mentioned, that they would come to the pub; but they would

not go to a church building. So they have been going down to the hotel, and we have been able to build relationships with them. Recently, they have even come down to a few of events that have been held down at Redlands. The next level is to involve them in some of the things we do, like “the story of God” thing we are doing and that is part of the process we are in now. We’ve also had people who would say, “I can’t stand Christians, not interested at all”, and they have come along on Friday nights. We originally said, “Great, come down and hang out. Have some food. Do you like food? Come down and do that.” We just try to create an atmosphere where a person feels non-threatened, not being hammered with questions or dealing with faux religiosity, but they are free to ask us, to challenge us



with any question; or not, if they choose. Over the course of time one person has gone from being very disinterested, not talking to anyone, to just this week asking, “Can we get together to do a discipleship group thing together weekly?” That’s the thing. That is the kind of transition we think..., no, we believe God is going to do and we have seen him do it; seen Him bring to himself people who are way out there come through a network of connected relationships; by building friendships over a long period of time.

Ultimately we have the conviction that the only one who saves people from their sin and builds the church is Jesus. The responsibility for a person’s salvation is His; our responsibility is simply to live out the life he has given us, live it out as a display. And we believe the community that we are growing can be a great expression, a most effective apologetic for the gospel, because people get an opportunity to observe in their own way. Some people might still be threatened by it or remain disinterested. But again, that is not our responsibility. Our responsibility is simply to gather around and involve whoever becomes part of it. And to be part of it might mean coming to the pub once every three or four weeks, enjoying a meal and talking nothing about Jesus; having a drink, and going home. To us we still see them as being part of it. For some reason, somewhere along the line, they have come and they are now connected to our group. And they become those who we pray for and what we pray about when we get together on Wednesdays. We think of Jesus, when he walked on earth he had twelve disciples, and of those twelve he had three who were closer, and one who was closest. But he also had that wider circle of people who we never really hear about – the multitudes, and they followed Jesus; they hung around. We believe (and we have seen) that through this process those who God is calling will filter through that wider group we are forming. We are aiming to build groups of people - who we call gospel communities, 15-25 people, who are starting to do life together. So if I am coming down here for coffee, I might text someone in the group and let them know, “I’m doing coffee. Come down here.” ‘Cos we get an opportunity to

build a relationship. Or it could mean bringing that friend of yours with you for a coffee, and we just get to talk and chat, build friendship. So you have a group of people who are doing that and more and more people are being invited to become part of our circle or relationships.

And there are those within that group; people who have what I call hobbies and interests, and so we encourage them to use those as opportunities. One of the young guys in our group, on a Thursday night, opens his house to all of the people he knows and cooks them roast dinner. Here's an opportunity for a whole bunch of people to get together again. One of the miracles of that experiment is that his place is filled with 20-25 year old men – the demographic group least likely to go to church at all. So here is this guy reaching that group for the sake of the gospel, albeit in a very low key and non-threatening manner. He will keep it low key and non-threatening – all the time building friendships, building relationships, inviting people in. We are already seeing people coming in – people coming from out here, coming in slowly as we live our lives before them. I see my role as simply one of cultivating a sense of gospel leadership in the people who are already doing it, to really to build that leadership into people like the “roast dinner” guy.

JDV: Do you do that leadership cultivation mainly through example, or through teaching?

RM: In keeping with our values, I mostly do it relationally as I hang out with these

guys. There is some mentoring I guess, but it's not formal or structured. I am also in one of these smaller discipleship groups I mentioned earlier. We call them “Fight Clubs.” The idea is to get people praying together to really nail down their sin and encourage each other by building depth in our own relationship with Christ. Most importantly it is driving the gospel deeper. You can have all the leadership gifts in the world, but if you don't have the gospel all you have is good leader but not a gospel leader.



These young guys also have the freedom and responsibility to push back on me. It is very much a peer to peer relationship. It's really encouraging.

The one thing I am not interested in is gathering Christians. I don't want this to be a lightning rod for people who want to do cool church.

JDV: So you have your Tuesday night teaching, your Wednesday night prayer meeting, Friday night at the pub, then you have your discipleship as well?

RM: Yes, we have just changed that a bit – we are going to run the Fight Clubs Sunday afternoon and see how that goes.

This might be the most convenient time for us to do it without disrupting the rest of the week. We'll see anyway. These are the things I am presently involved in but then there is the Thursday night roast thing that the other guys do – I love it, they get the neighbours in – their whole street is filled with guys working on their cars. "Come on over, play some pool!" It's awesome, he has turned the house into a mission field. So a lot of the stuff we are doing happens organically, it just evolves, opportunities emerge, situations happen.. Somebody says: "I am really interested in that." For instance, we have two girls in the group; one is interested in working with the homeless; the other is interested in working with indigenous people. So we sit down them and think: "How can we work this; where are the indigenous connecting points here in the Redlands community?" So we begin to think through some of the possibilities for that. We tap into the passions that people have for engaging with certain people and then start to build something around them, give them some people to help them, give them whatever they need.

JDV: It doesn't surprise us that when we read the gospels that some of Jesus' first disciples were people that were just working together, they had relationships already, they were fishermen. They hung out on the shores of Galilee, and Andrew goes out and finds Peter.

RM: Yes, they were ordinary people – not the great people, just ordinary people, just regular folk, much like the people who walk these streets here around this café everyday. We try to talk in a way that reaches the ordinary person. We try to make the entry level very low, whilst

placing a very high premium on discipleship. The entry point however is low. We even welcome people who are utterly opposed to the gospel. We don't know why they are opposed until there is an opportunity to build relationships with them. In the end they might still be utterly opposed.

So to get back to your original question about strategies, our strategy would be in a very broad sense to build communities of 15-25 people. But we would include in that number those who are still not yet Christians; those people who are hanging out with us, people who keep coming, not participating in the way that we might have assumed people might participate, but they are still participating. During this process potential leaders will emerge. You watch people,



and you say: "There is a gift that needs to be nurtured." My prayer always is: "God as we grow, raise up men who love the gospel and who could lead one of these things." When we get to 15-25 regulars, then it is a good time to think about multiplying. We are kind of moving into that process at the moment, getting close to that. I'd like to see the community thing working deeper in our group first, though. Unfortunately, there is still this suburban thing, people keeping to themselves – but we will work on it. That is part of the strategy for us over the next three to six months; to see how that works. And I guess once we have three

groups – to get back to the church planting aspect, if we get let's say, three groups, one here, one closer to Birkdale, and one maybe in Alexandra Hills. Let's say that each had about 20 people in them, all infiltrating their neighbourhoods, their local sporting clubs, all of that, all of the life we would like to see happen, we would then be looking at planting that as a church. This a different kind of church, a group of gospel communities, who on a regular basis – be that weekly, fortnightly, monthly, or whatever – all come together in celebration, praise, maybe some teaching on a larger scale. And then say to them, "Go! This meeting is not the church". The church is what you do with your life. Get together and then disperse.

JDV: This sounds very much like the Acts 2 church.

RM: We also think, and from what I have read, this also fits our postmodern culture. It is very suitable to that. You only have to go out on a Thursday or Friday night and look around you, people are everywhere. They are gathering in places, they are meeting in places. They are crying out for community. They are not always aware of it, but it is there. This is tapping into the latent need, that latent desire for community. There will always be a need for what you will call the attractional model of church – where people will just come to the church building. We are not against that. We believe you need both: the attractional and the missional, or incarnational, if you like to call it that.

The one thing I am not really interested in is just gathering Christians. I don't want this to be a lightning rod for people who

want to do cool church. My focus is upon reaching those who would never darken the door of the church but who may be just peeking through the cracks a bit. We ought to go to them, because they are not really coming to us.

JDV: What are some obstacles you have faced, some pitfalls?

RM: I think just suburban life has been difficult. It is hard enough for me to break free from this. I say, "I've had a hard day at work. I want to sit at home, turn on the television." To get people out of their "house as haven" mentality is difficult. You have to be very deliberate about that. Leading in that context is important. I guess most of those things flow from that. That is, it is very hard at times to get us to move outside of our own experiences, our own selfishness with regards to what we want to do with our time and our lives. Someone might



say, "I want to stay home and watch television." Well, yes, that is fine, but what if you call up a bunch of your mates or people from the gospel community and have them come around and do it with you? Watching television is fine; let's not blame television. But if you are going to do it, pull some other people in to enjoy it with you. Who knows there might be an opportunity when the television is finally turned off and you are

washing the dishes after you have eaten, an opportunity to talk about something a little deeper than Australian Idol. It is breaking through that barrier; that is a huge challenge.

As for my own limitations regarding leadership, this is very much a key thing for me right now. I spend a quite a bit of time - not reading about how to be a good leader, but trying to put myself in situations where I have to lead well. And also learning from those who I have friendships and relationships with about how they go through that process. I had the opportunity to sit down with Steve Timmis from Crowded House when I was in the UK a couple of years ago and just going through with him what would be the things as a leader he would do differently if he had to do it all over again. His encouragement and wisdom was gold. I have been trying to implement some that ever since.

Knowing what to teach people. I am very focused on people being grounded in the gospel. To have to reiterate that over and over and over and over again and not feel as if you are going over the same ground unnecessarily; realising that this is an important thing to do. These are all good things and when you think of them as obstacles – well they are good obstacles in one sense, for they are the things you have to do to build into people.

JDV: If you were to meet someone who would like to get something like this started where they are, what would you say to them? How would someone get started?

RM: I guess it depends on what they want to do. If they have a heart for the lost, a

deep desire to see the gospel formed in the lives of those around them, then I would probably give them Steve Timmis and Tim Chester's book *Total Church* – read that; that has been very helpful for us; we are about working through the idea of that book in our community now. I would be very clear that the gospel must be at the core of what you are doing; this is not cool church that you are doing, getting together, holding hands, and singing *Kum Ba Yah!* That's not what it is all about at all and *Total Church* is very clear about that. And then I would just say, "Go!"

“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you – always!” - Jesus