

Seedling Church

The Story

The Story of Seedling Church (So Far)

Abbotsford Baptist Church has been a historic part of this community since 1910, when it was planted by a small group of Swedish immigrants. It has survived fire, flood, and been a spiritual home to many generations of people here in Abbotsford. Several years ago Abbotsford Baptist Church began a concerted, fervent season of prayer and seeking God for the future of the church. With the support and guidance of British Columbia Baptist Conference (BCBC) the decision was made to take the faith, legacy, roots, and resources of Abbotsford Baptist Church and replant as a new BCBC church. A church re-plant team was developed to begin leading Abbotsford Baptist Church through the replant process. This team has two parts: the Board chaired by Bernard Mukwavi, and a five person Ministry Team composed of both volunteer and staff leaders. Fueled by years of prayer within the church, an envisioning of what this new church could be began to take shape—a fresh new life springing up out of deep historic roots—like a seedling tree growing up out of a nursery stump. And so we had our name: Seedling Church. September 24 we will officially open our doors as Seedling Church, turning the page to the next chapter in this ongoing story of being a light in this neighbourhood and city.

Through the spring and summer of this past year (2023) we have been working towards gathering a group of people that are committed to helping us launch the replant. This has primarily been done by hosting a weekly Sunday dinner service. This core group has continued to grow, and we have seen quite a number of people new to our church, as well as current members regularly participate in this. This has been an excellent opportunity to pray, discuss and impart vision, and experiment with various strategies with a larger core group. This has been an exciting time within which we have felt God give us a clearer picture of the way forward, unique to this beautiful congregation, season and neighbourhood.

Centred Around a Meal

This idea of centering church around a meal is not new; it is ancient, finding its roots in the very earliest Christians, and indeed in Christ himself. Jesus taught in the synagogues, but he also did a great deal of his teaching at a dinner table. He would tell stories and ask questions, with time and space given for those he was teaching to respond. This style of teaching was not unique to Jesus, but epitomised the way that the ancient world taught and learned. Recently, a global movement of churches has been returning to this structure, with many “dinner churches” popping up all over the place, and plenty of academic research and many books being written on the subject. Theologian David Fitch, who has been leading such a church, put it this way: “Doing church around a table and a meal is going back to the sweet spot of historic Christianity. This is where we are naturally at our best. So we can relax and just take that simple journey back to the Jesus table where Christianity makes the most sense, both for the already and the not-yet believers.”

There are many advantages to structuring a service around a meal, but we will highlight three areas of increase flowing from this, that we feel the world (and the Church) are particularly in need of at this point in history:

An increase in intimacy, an increase in participation, and an increase in inclusion.

Intimacy

For most of history families have continued to eat together, and for good reason. Eating together binds people together in a way that few other activities do. The laughter, face to face conversation, and vulnerability of having to sit, relax and feed ourselves together builds deep relationships. In times like ours, when families are less often eating meals together, we tend to see a breakdown in family relationships. Eating together literally sets people together in proximity, and prevents us from becoming isolated. At no point in recent history has this been of more dire importance to our world than right now, post-Covid, where a new epidemic of isolation and loneliness has reared its head. In a typical stage-centric church service, it is very possible to sit in a pew, stare at the back of someone's head, a couple strangers on a stage, and leave without having any kind of relational engagement with another person. This is tragic, and absolutely not the way the Church is intended to function. There are ways to minimise this issue in a stage-centric service, but making the shift to a table-centric service dismantles it. It is near impossible to share a meal around a table with other people, and leave unseen and unnoticed. The structure change from stage to table does more to increase intimacy and relational engagement within a service than any amount of intentional "turn-and-greet-your-neighbour" moments ever could. People are dying for family-style dinners—not because they need the dinner, but because they desperately need familial connection. What is the Church but the family of God?

Participation

It goes without saying church congregants are not only meant to be spectators, but participants in a Church service. The stage-centric service makes this an uphill battle. Like it or not, there is often not much difference between our modern church services, and a secular concert, aside from the subject matter. As our consumeristic, entertainment-driven culture has evolved, a format that once conveyed communal learning and engagement now by its similarity sends the message that this is yet another show, put on for an audience to enjoy. No matter how many sermons we preach about not just listening, but acting out our faith, it is still entirely possible for congregants to listen attentively to a sermon, and then go away and never think about it again. When we, instead, listen to a teaching, and then discuss with others, it helps our brains, so shaped by today's multi-faceted media, to differentiate this experience, and facilitates learning on a deeper level. It has the added benefit of naturally placing more mature Christians amongst newer (or not-yet) Christians, structuring things so that they are engaging in discipling others, knee to knee, as they share stories of God's faithfulness, build relationships, and pray for one another at the table. Mission and ministry can be put into practice right there within the service itself, rather than being something to figure out how to do on one's own after we all leave.

Inclusion

Lastly, inviting a neighbour to a meal, even as part of church service, opens up the door to a kind of inclusive hospitality that inviting them to a typical church service does not. Everyone knows they need to eat. Not everyone knows they need the kind of spiritual nourishment only found in Christ. The invitation to a meal is universal in a way that an invitation to a stage-centric service might not seem to many people. The meal creates a lower barrier of entry for people unfamiliar with church or Christianity in general. This initial, universal connection provides us a point from which we may engage with our neighbours on a deeper level, where conversation about spiritual matters is natural, and which ushers them into a place where they will see the gospel both preached, and demonstrated.

Theologian and historian Dr. Mike Graves in his book, *Table Talk*, acknowledges that, though there is no one right way to do church, and the Bible doesn't demand a meal setting for services (despite the eating of bread and drinking of wine being a central ordinance), there is still something uniquely beautiful about the meal setting that lends itself exceptionally well to the heart of Christianity. "What took place at those first-century gatherings" he says, "resonates with the very nature of God and the gospel itself – intimacy, inclusion, festive joy, and participation in community. Many of the historical developments since have led to a loss of these qualities, even as the theology of the meal has become more and more complex."

Service Time Change

In light of how valuable a meal is to a service, we must stress how important it is to begin with a meal, rather than to end with it. The meal is the most familiar, most comfortable point of entry for unchurched people; starting with it gives them a chance to get to know people in a setting not totally alien to them before being introduced to the parts they may have uncomfortable preconceived ideas about. This way the meal is front and centre, and relationships are being cultivated, opening up the door to hearing a message from the Word, discussion, prayer and worship. Starting with a meal means setting a start time that lines up with that priority. For the time being, we will start our service at 4:30 and adjust if the needs of our community changes.

Name Change

The name Seedling Church was inspired by the idea that there is a new young church springing up out of deep, historic roots. Though Seedling Church is different from Abbotsford Baptist in a number of ways, we always want to honour the fact that we are planted into a church with a rich heritage. Seedling Church draws its nutrients from, and is rooted in, what has come before. We are and will remain baptist. We desire to maintain our strong ties with BCBC and BGC. We also want to follow Paul's example of being "all things to all people", in this way: by making ourselves as accessible as possible to as many people as possible, letting go of whatever we can in good conscience that would keep some from associating with us because of something like a misunderstood word (i.e. Baptist) in our name. We believe that the work God is calling our church to is more important than the name on the building, and so we only want to include words that will help us in that work, rather than hinder some from coming to us at all.

Team Leadership Model

One last major shift that we have taken while we replant as Seedling Church, has been to move from a single pastor leadership model, to a team leadership model. Our team is made up of co-equals. We play different roles, and each member of the team has been freed up to different extents to give our time over to the service of our church. We have more or less influence in different areas according to our various giftings and responsibilities, but each has a voice, and we try to seek the voice of each one in all areas. Accordingly, each one of us, when we speak, speaks with the authority of the whole. Because of this, we strive to be continually in mutual submission to one another, coming together to make decisions and seeking the wisdom God has granted to the others. As we each submit to one another in this way, we regularly encourage one another to submit in a greater way still to the leadership of our Lord. We work under the steadfast belief that the Spirit is active within each one of us, and will lead us in this. We recognise that, even as we share the weight of leadership together, our Lord is holding the team as a whole within that.

Our Future

As we begin the process of enacting some of these shifts, we do so with prayer, and trembling. We do not take lightly the history and traditions of this church and all that God has done in and through this body. Even so, we feel very strongly that God is calling us into a new way of doing things, and are stepping out in faith that He will continue to lead us. We believe that if God is truly leading us into this, He will make it fruitful, and indeed we are already seeing fruit. We believe God has called us to be a church that is intergenerational, where young and old benefit from each other, and we are beginning to see this happen once again, as more and more young adults, teens and children get connected to our church.

Our Mission

Seedling Church exists to glorify God,
being rooted in the word,
growing in Christ's love,
and planting seeds of hope in our
neighbourhood,
city,
and all the world.