

AG Church Plants Invading Red Sox Land With Relevant Gospel

It has been said that planting a Pentecostal church in Boston (in New England) is almost as difficult as finding a Red Sox baseball fan cheering for the hated rival Yankees. Few familiar with the region would disagree.

With nearly 4.6 million residents, the Boston metropolitan area is well known to much of the world. Yet, for decades, despite the best efforts of evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, establishing a strong presence has been more than just a little daunting.

According to one church leader, 93 percent of the population has little to no Bible knowledge and a mere 2 percent claim to be evangelical Christians. In addition, a strong academic influence which debases the Christian faith—oddly enough, a perspective gained many times through colleges originally established as Christian institutions—increases the disdain for and distance between people and a relationship with Christ.

So, it is a little more than remarkable that within the last month, two new Assemblies of God churches have launched in Boston—Anchor Church and The Link—with both opening services exceeding well over 100 in attendance.

The Link, led by Pastor Caleb McNaughton, a recent Southwestern Assemblies of God University (SAGU) graduate, gave Bostonians a first glimpse of the coming church last year, in a most unusual manner—it hosted a football camp!

“Our first event, literally, before we even had a team meeting, was this past summer,” McNaughton explains. “Some old friends were involved in Pop Warner (pee wee) football, so we just asked them how we could add value to what they were

doing—so we ended up hosting a week-long football camp in the park for kids. It was a huge opportunity to let people know we care.”

McNaughton says that he believes the key to success is relationships, as a “build it and they will come” mentality simply won’t work.

“I sit down and have coffee with people quite a bit,” he says. “There are so many people in the area that are unchurched or dechurched—and by ‘dechurched’ I mean they have been out of church for five or more years. Our focus is on keeping the approach and the message simple so that it makes sense to people who have little biblical knowledge.”

McNaughton, who spent much of his childhood in nearby Braintree, Mass., says he knew that God had a call on his life to one day return to the area to minister. Only, he felt it would be later in life—not a 24-year-old single whose ministry experience was being a youth pastor for two years while he was attending SAGU.

“God placed Boston on my heart, and I couldn’t get away from His call,” McNaughton says. “The more I researched, the more I found how few people go to church, how few healthy churches there were in the Northeast and how this massive area desperately needed something fresh and life-giving to come into play. Finally, I just knew I had to step out in faith.”

In The Link’s first service, six people gave their lives to Christ, with five more rededicating their lives—McNaughton says that the first person to raise her hand was a mother whom they had met at the football camp event. In its second service, eight more people chose to accept Christ as their personal Savior.

Dr. Randy Quackenbush and his wife, Shelly, are leading Anchor Church. However, their church has a very different mission field within Boston, having been called to establish a church

in the music center of the city—with Quackenbush seeming to be prepared by God for the moment.

Quackenbush is the former worship leader at the megachurch James River Assembly in Ozark, Missouri. He's a graduate of Evangel University, AG Theological Seminary and possesses a doctorate in biblical worship from Gordon Conwell Seminary.

And the church's location? It is currently meeting across the street from Berklee College of Music, with the Boston Conservatory and New England Conservatory just down the street and Symphony Hall, where the Boston Symphony and the famous Boston Pops orchestra perform, nearby as well.

Having been approached several years ago about planting a church in this area by Southern New England District Superintendent Bob Wise—who both church planters expressed appreciation for—Quackenbush says that the road to planting the church progressed in God's timing.

"The Lord took us on journey, as at first, we couldn't wrap our minds around the idea of planting a church," Quackenbush says. "But God was speaking to us, giving us the vision, and taking us on baby steps to finally experience real confirmation."

In addition to the challenges that come with launching a new church, Quackenbush says that he's come to accept that Anchor Church will likely have a very transient congregation, as students and musicians cycle in and out of the area on a regular basis.

"With 250,000 college students in the Boston area, there's incredible opportunity," Quackenbush says, "but it also means, that at most, every four years, our congregation will be significantly different as students graduate and move on and new students arrive. In addition, even established musicians are often, by the nature of the business, regularly on the move."

Quackenbush says that the focus of Anchor Church will be on spiritual formation and discipleship so, as people transition from Boston and Anchor Church to other parts of the country, the church will be sending out strong believers who will impact their new communities for Christ.

As with McNaughton, Quackenbush sees the Boston area as a mission field—a field that, as far as Pentecostal influence is concerned, is worse off than many third world nations.

Steve Pike, national director of the AG Church Multiplication Network, says that McNaughton and Quackenbush are not playing on a level field in comparison to other church plants in different parts of the country, saying even a small success in the Northeast would compare to a large success in many other places.

“In some states, the number of people to AG churches is approximately 7,500 people for every one AG church,” Pike says. “In Southern New England, that number explodes to about 62,000 to 1. The average across the United States is at 28,611 to 1. These numbers clearly indicate just what kind of a challenging environment church planters face in the Northeast.”

The financial cost of establishing a church in Boston is also steep, as the cost of living in Boston is higher than most U.S. cities. According to the website , living in Boston costs 1.6 times as much as living in Denver, 2.4 times as much as living in Orlando and 2.9 times as much as living in Springfield, Mo., meaning a \$100,000 salary spent in Springfield has the same “buying power” as a \$290,000 salary spent in Boston.

But neither McNaughton nor Quackenbush are daunted by the long odds or high costs as they believe in God’s calling upon their lives—being encouraged by the opportunities rather than overwhelmed by the challenges. In addition, both men secured

matching fund grants—Quackenbush from the AG Church Multiplication Network/AG Trust and McNaughton from another organization.

“The mindset of so many has been, it is the Northeast ... and some have bought into the ‘survival’ mentality,” McNaughton says. “But we’re not buying into it. If you play basketball on the heels of your feet, you’ll get pushed over. We’re going to play on the balls our feet, pressing forward, connecting people to Christ.”

“It does take a lot of faith,” Quackenbush says. “If you look at all the challenges here, it can get discouraging; look at God, and our faith soars. With God, truly all things are possible and He cares about the people in Boston more than we ever could.”

Both church leaders also express deep appreciation for their parent church, Allison Park (Pennsylvania) Church (AG) and Pastor Jeff Leake, who has purposed to plant 100 churches in the Northeast in 10 years.

“We really wouldn’t be here without Pastor Jeff and Allison Park,” Quackenbush says. “They’ve been there for us and made this possible.”

McNaughton agrees, as some of his team are people from Allison Park Church who moved to Boston to help with the launching of his church.

With the encouragement of Allison Park Church, the trust in God’s calling upon their lives, long hours of networking and the prayers of friends and family, both churches have gotten off to a strong start, but there’s a lot of work that still awaits.

“I look at people on the subway, and the blank looks and despair on their faces,” Quackenbush shares. “They need hope, they need life, they need the rest that comes with knowing the

Lord. We have this vision for one life at a time being transformed—that's how the Great Awakening originally began in New England. Why not again?"