

Leadership, Race and Evangelism in the 21st Century

Kyle Searcy, pastor of Fresh Anointing House of Worship in Montgomery, Ala., has a passion for developing a new generation of leaders in the church. He is a recognized and highly respected pastor, author and leader of a growing media ministry.

Searcy's multiracial, multigenerational and international congregation is launching a new campus in Norcross, Ga., just outside Atlanta. But if that isn't enough, he also leads a network of 10 churches in the United States and more than 230 in Africa, including countries like Liberia, Nigeria and Ghana.

Searcy recently talked with filmmaker and media consultant Phil Cooke about everything from how the church is impacting culture to the Trayvon Martin case to what it will take to make a difference for the gospel in the 21st century. Here's what happened:

Phil Cooke: Do you remember the moment you decided to become a pastor? Tell me about it.

Kyle Searcy: It was in 1993. I wish I could tell you I had an angelic visitation and prophetic confirmation. But I still remember it vividly.

I had been a member of a church for five years when I received an invitation to be the senior pastor. Immediately, fear gripped me to the point that my knees were literally knocking together! I was in my 20s—too young, in my mind, and way too inexperienced to ever feel “ready” to become a senior pastor. But I remembered a principle I had learned: Where there is no

fear, courage is not needed. The Lord challenged me to embrace courage and accept the assignment. I have never looked back or regretted my decision.

Cooke: You've always been known for innovative thinking. Wasn't your current church building a former nightclub in Birmingham?

Searcy: This may sound unusual for a church, but it was a blessing in our case. We had been meeting in a building with a small sanctuary area. Our church grew so rapidly, we had to do four services each Sunday. Our tradition at that time was to have time to wait on God, plenty of time for the messages and response, unlimited time for worship. The Sunday schedule became an endurance test for our team. And the only way we would be able to grow any further was to create yet a fifth service.

We had plans to build a facility large enough for our entire congregation to meet together in one service. But God had different plans. As we were raising funds for our new building, a property became available that was the center of discos, nightclubs, and had been a front for illegal activity.

In a few weeks, we purchased the 2,200 seat auditorium and 374 acres of land for just \$1.7 million and transformed it into our current sanctuary. We now serve Communion on the same counter where different kinds of "spirits" were sold and served.

Cooke: Pastors and church leaders have a million responsibilities today. Why does the issue of leadership stand out for you?

Searcy: I experienced a leadership crisis that taught me a lesson I will not soon forget. In the early days of my pastorate, I thought the way you grew a church was by prayer alone. So we prayed. I personally prayed three to five hours per day, and at one point our church had 17 prayer meetings

per week.

After several years of intense energy toward prayer, I came to the realization we were not growing numerically. In fact, some years we lost more members than we gained. I took time to meditate on what the problem was, saying to the Lord, "God, this is not working. Either something is wrong with You or something is wrong with me—and I think it's me."

The Lord showed me that my church had not grown because I had not grown. Church is a spiritual institution but also a human one, and people require leadership. I began to study systems and patterns, human behavior and development. I still prayed, but now I did more than pray.

The result—growth for me and for the church. We instantly began to grow to the point we doubled and then tripled in membership. I realized firsthand the truth of John Maxwell's statement that everything rises and falls on leadership—even the church. When I grew, my church grew. This experience taught me that the best way to impact the future is to impact leadership.

Cooke: Your church's hometown of Montgomery, Ala., has a fascinating history. It's the birthplace of the civil rights movement, and its neighboring city, Birmingham, is where Dr. Martin Luther King wrote the famous "Letter From Birmingham Jail" in April 1963. The letter was a powerful defense of his strategy of nonviolent resistance to racism and became a key text for the American civil rights movement. How does living in the shadow of those events inspire your own personal leadership style?

Searcy: Dr. King's philosophy of leadership was influenced largely by the teachings of Scripture. Although he feasted on the table of others like Gandhi, Jesus had the greatest impact on his philosophy of nonviolent resistance. Living in the shadow of these events has shaped my leadership by motivating

me. It is Dr. King's life that has become a testament to me of how one person's life can impact the world. His legacy emboldens me to shun excuses and maximize moments for greatest impact.

Cooke: After the recent George Zimmerman verdict, I noticed the Montgomery media sought out your opinion. What did you tell them, and what's your outlook for America when it comes to racism today?

Searcy: Although much progress has been made, racism still exists, but so does classism and sexism and more. The heart of racism is division, and the root of division is pride, and pride is a product of fallen humanity. Christ is the answer when it comes to redemption of our fallen humanity.

I shared with our city that when wronged, we must forgive. I told them that if in some way they feel justice was not done for Trayvon, then leave it to the ultimate judge to settle—God. Our job is to make sure we are delivered from every vestige of racism in our hearts. National issues often reveal personal biases. I used the issue to call people to repentance for whatever issues we may have that need fixing.

Cooke: What's the state of leadership in the American church today?

Searcy: Leadership in the American church today is anemic, but I believe we are about to stop the bleeding. The primary training for pastors over the last few decades has been on pastoral care and some evangelism. There has been very little training in the area of leadership in the average seminary/Bible school. A leader of a church is more like a spiritual CEO of a "kingdom corporation" than simply a caregiver. The lack of training in leadership has hurt us.

Pastors can certainly be great leaders, and I believe leaders are not born but made, so every pastor can ascend the leadership ladder at will. There is a shift and growing

awareness of our need to lead. Pastors are realizing—as I came to realize—that it takes much more than a few spiritual gifts to successfully navigate a church. It takes a leader. As a result, there is a growing emphasis on leadership and integrity in this hour, and the church will be better for it.

Cooke: Your own church, Fresh Anointing House of Worship, is expanding. Tell me about your new campus outside Atlanta and why you felt the need to try a multisite strategy.

Searcy: Twenty years ago, God prompted our hearts that we would someday begin a church in Atlanta, and we believe now is the time to fulfill that mission. There are 2.7 million people in the Atlanta area without a connection to God. We want to do our part in helping some of them get connected.

We officially launch the Fresh Anointing House of Worship Atlanta on Sept. 29 in Norcross High School at 9:00 a.m. We currently have a dynamic team on location that have been sowing seeds through prayer and networking. Together, we are very excited about the launch of Fresh Anointing Atlanta. We sense that when people come into the service, it will be like a breath of fresh air!

Cooke: Your new book, *The Secrets of Biblical Wisdom: Unleashing the Power of Heavenly Insight in Your Life*, has received a great reception. Why is actively seeking wisdom so important for a leader?

Searcy: Wisdom is insight onsite. It not only gives you the *what* of a situation but the *who*, *when*, *where*, *how*, and *why*. Scripture declares that wisdom is better than:

- Strength (Eccl. 9:16)
- Weapons of war (Eccl. 9:18)
- Gold and silver (Prov. 16:16)
- Jewels (Prov. 8:11)
- Anything else, because nothing you desire can compare to it (Prov. 8:11)

If nothing we can possibly desire comes close to the value of wisdom, then we all need it—from the leader to those who are being led. But for leaders, wisdom is especially important because of the insight it provides in situations that affect multiple people.

King Solomon's life is an example of this. Solomon is called the wisest man on earth from his time until the end of time. One of the ways Scripture describes the wisdom given to him is as the "breadth of mind." As Solomon's mind was broadened, he gained insight into the true nature of things. He began to understand concepts and information that he never studied: "He spoke of trees ... animals and birds and creeping things and fish. Men came from all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon" (1 Kings 4:33-34, NASB). Solomon didn't attend a zoological institute to learn about the animal kingdom. His mind was broadened, his intuition quickened and his understanding expanded in a moment.

That's the power of wisdom. Wisdom sees beyond what the average person sees. It reveals the true nature of things, allowing you to understand what natural deduction and reasoning could not reveal. It sees what is hidden and discerns the obscure.

As you can see, this kind of insight is extremely valuable for all leaders. I still believe it's the one who sees the clearest that can lead the farthest.

Cooke: What's the most exciting thing on the horizon for Kyle Searcy?

Searcy: There are three things I will focus on for the next several years: 1) I will labor to see tens of thousands of people become born again through church planting (local and abroad) and strategic evangelism initiatives; 2) I will raise and train leaders, mentoring them so they can have the opportunity to arise to their full potential. This will

strengthen the church as it expands throughout the earth; and 3) I will write books focused toward 1 and 2 above.

I want to share with nonbelievers and believers alike the incredible wealth of knowledge and experience that God has taught me through personal time with Him as well as from many people who have poured into my life. Some of these will be about issues many people face on a daily basis and others will be training tools.