

Love, Not Labels

Pastor J.J. Vasquez was skeptical when God first called him to plant a church in Winter Park, Florida. The demographics didn't make sense. His preaching style seemed like a strange fit. He saw better locations elsewhere. But he obeyed.

Now his church, Journey Church, is a thriving and diverse young church of Spirit-filled Christians. Vasquez told Charisma about his early call to ministry, the value of a diverse church and the trends that both excite and worry him about the next generation of Christians.

This interview—originally recorded for our New Year, New Voices podcast series—has been edited for length and clarity. Listen to the full interview here:

Berglund: Can you start by sharing your testimony with me?

Vasquez: I was born and raised in New York City. Ministry was never really in my family's trajectory, besides my dad being a volunteer youth leader at his church. But somehow the Lord called me at a super young age, sent me to youth camp, and from that moment on, I just felt the leading to be in ministry. There was a call at one of the camps to meet this person called the Holy Spirit. I went up and got prayed for, and ever since then, I just knew that I wanted to serve God with the whole of my heart.

When I was 12, that happened, and then I shared my experience with my lead pastor at my church. He gave me an opportunity to preach to the children's church. I did that and, after preaching to the children's church, did a call for salvation. I saw like eight kids raise their hands to give their hearts to Jesus. I don't know if they meant it, or if it was because I was giving out lollipops or what, but I shared that

experience with my pastor. So he said, "Wow, that's awesome," and then asked me, at age 12, to preach on a Sunday to our entire church.

That's where a big part of my heart to open up doors for the next generation comes from. Somebody did that for me, right? I think we're all standing on the shoulders of the leaders and pastors who went before us. From that point on, I just never looked back. I knew that ministry was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I continued to preach and travel and minister as an evangelist.

I went through some ups and downs in my teenage years. I think there are two sides to the salvation story when you grow up in church. When you meet Jesus later on in your life, in your 20s or 30s, those people look back at those of us who grew up in church and think, Man, you're so lucky. But the other side of growing up in church is it breeds a sense of familiarity, and familiarity breeds contempt. You don't really appreciate what's special about this relationship with Jesus and what's special about lives being changed. That's my story. I kind of lost what was special about church and slipped away. I kind of felt like God had robbed me of some of my youth. When I was younger, I wanted to kind of live the life that all my friends were living.

I like to joke around and say that the last time I got saved was when I was 17 at a youth camp. Because between 12 and 17, I might have gotten saved like 30-40 times. Anybody who's been a Christian in their youth, they know what I'm talking about. But at 17, I really decided to give my heart to Jesus and fully commit to Him once more, and I've never looked back since. It's been an amazing journey.

I helped plant a church in Gainesville, started an internship program and completed my master's degree at Southeastern University Divinity. I was the district youth director for Florida multicultural districts, so I oversaw about 400 youth

ministries from Miami to the Carolinas, where I put on events just like the one where I met Jesus and got filled with the Holy Spirit. With a youth pastor at a great church here in Orlando, I wrote a book, and then ended up becoming a professor at Southeastern University, teaching youth and family ministry.

Almost five years ago, I felt the Lord beginning to pull on my heart to plant a church. So I sat down with my wife and our pastor, and we decided to do it. God led us to Winter Park, Florida. On Sept. 18, 2016, we launched, and it's been a fun ride ever since. Now we're living here in Winter Park, leading a church and having the time of our lives.

Berglund: You mentioned that you're very passionate about opening up doors for the next generation. What are some of the ways you try to do that at your church?

Vasquez: We have a local college, Journey Leadership Academy. We partner with Southeastern University, so we're an extension site of theirs, where we offer associate's and bachelor's degrees in leadership and other disciplines. For us, that's an opportunity to raise up leaders. We've got about seven students who are in that right now, pursuing ministry and learning leadership. I believe in creating opportunities, whether it's on stage or behind closed doors.

I think too often we wait for people to be good at whatever it is they do before we let them shine. Something that I like to tell other pastors is, "You know, you sucked at one time. You sucked at what you did at one time, and somebody knew you were bad, and they still let you do what you're doing today. They didn't wait for you to have it all together. They made a way." I think we have to make a way for others if we're ever going to see our ministry grow beyond us.

I like to say you need to have a high standard of excellent but a low standard of excellence when it comes to empowering

others. What I mean by that is, not everybody that comes to you is going to be excellent. But when they come to you, wherever they are, call them higher to a level of excellence. That's how we do it through our college, stage opportunities and leadership opportunities. We want to make sure that their voices are being heard.

Berglund: Our former news director here at Charisma, Jessilyn Lancaster, visited your church firsthand. One of the things she told me about going there was that she was struck by the diversity of the church—both ethnically and generationally. Has that been a very intentional process for you and the leadership team?

Vasquez: I think it was intentional on God's part, for sure. We just rolled with what we felt God was doing. For those who can't tell, I'm 33 and Puerto Rican, and I was born and raised in New York City. And God called us to plant a church in Winter Park, Florida. If you are not familiar with central Florida, Winter Park is not like super-duper diverse. Winter Park is mostly Caucasian, and you're either in college—going to one of the two amazing colleges we have close by: UCF and Rollins—or you're older and retired. When we did our research, that's what Winter Park is.

Church planters say you want to plant a church in a place where people are within your wingspan age-wise—like 10 years up, 10 years down—and also ethnicity, because people want to go to church with other people who look like them. That's not what we promote, but that's apparently what people want. So when my wife and I came out of all these church planting trainings, we thought, Well, forget Winter Park. We need to plant a church in Kissimmee, you know what I'm saying? (For those who don't know, Kissimmee's like little Puerto Rico here in Central Florida. It's 90% Hispanic. So we thought, Man, if we've got a church there, we'll reach a ton of people.)

But we really felt the Lord pressing Winter Park on our heart,

so we said, "All right, well, we'll see what God does." We were really nervous about launching. We didn't know if we would resonate with the community. And then God started sending us people of different ages, races and ethnicities. So when I would go out to coffee with some of our early attenders, I'd ask them, "Hey, why are you here? Just being honest, because I want to know. There's a ton of great churches in central Florida. You picked us, and you're here, and you're serving, and you're committed and you're invested. Why?" And they called out the diversity. They said, "We like this. We want to be at a church where people look different than us."

I give the people in our church a ton of credit. It's so easy to worship with people who look like you. But it takes another level of courage and commitment to a vision to walk into a building where the pastor is not in your age group, where the person to your left or to your right doesn't have the same skin color as you.

As much as we would like to say that we pushed for it—and we do talk about it and make sure we get diversity on stage—I do believe it was really in the heart of God for this particular city. God knew what he was doing. And we love it, man, because everybody brings a different flavor, and everybody brings a different perspective.

It's so great to be in a small group, which I really think is the most powerful kind of room for diversity. I think it is healing when you're in a small group and there are people who are a different skin color than you, of a different age group than you, possibly even a different sexual orientation than you, and you're just doing life with these people. You're being forced to understand them, because they get a chance to open up, and they share their heart and life. You hear the stuff they're going through. It's a whole 'nother level of empathy.

As far as the divide and the tension we see in America today, I think I speak for a lot of Christians when I say, as important as politics are—and I was a political science major—I really believe when it comes to a lot of that pain that we're feeling, I think the church is going to be where the healing takes place honestly. I mean, the only thing that's going to bond people together is either going to be a massive tragedy—I lived in New York during 9/11, so I saw people of different faiths, colors and ages all come together after massive tragedy—or the same thing that binds us together in heaven, which is worship. And I hope it's worship. I hope that's the thing that heals us and brings us all together.

Berglund: We often note that among the next generation, there are increasing rates of being unaffiliated with any religious belief or not being open to religion. How do you use faith as a unifying force in a generation that often says they don't believe in God?

Vasquez: The Orlando Sentinel, which is the second largest publication in the state of Florida—definitely the largest in Orlando—was doing an article on Millennials leaving the church. So the reporter came to do an article on our church; it was just a crazy happenstance. The intention was to tell the story of how this generation is leaving the church. That's what the grand narrative was. And when the reporter came, she saw so many young people worshipping that she changed the story. The story was no longer about them leaving the church; the story was about them finding a place.

So I tend to rail a bit against that narrative. I believe it in a lot of ways. But I think when the church is healthy, and the church is doing the right things the right way, I don't think this generation is averse to faith. I think they're averse to religion. I think they're averse to labels. I think they're averse to being categorized. But they're not averse to faith. I think they're more open to faith today than ever, honestly.

I think it's more that they don't want to be against something; they want to be for something. For a long time, the message in church was what we were against. There's a shift that's taking place to focus on what we're for. When we make that really clear—we're for Jesus, people, love, restoration, hope, process, reconciliation, grace—I think they run to the banner of Christianity. So I don't think they're anti-religion. I think they're anti-label and even anti-anti, if that's even a thing. They don't want to be against anything. But when you tell them what we're for, that becomes a rallying cry they can come behind.

Berglund: How do you then see the Holy Spirit at work in the next generation?

Vasquez: I think He's at work in the same way He's been at work in every generation. We know that the Holy Spirit's job on earth at this point in history is to draw men to Christ. I don't see that mission statement changing. I think it's taking a new form. I think that He's operating through different faces. He's operating through different mediums like social media, TV and video. But I think it's the same mission, man. I think he's just trying to get people to know who Jesus is.

I think if we're going to see an impact evangelically, to see people's lives change, we're going to need to lean into the Holy Spirit. Great communication skills alone aren't going to do it any longer. I think there are just so many great communicators, and there are so many great environments. We need to lean into Him longer.

What I do see is the message of the Holy Spirit—when it comes to empowering baptism, signs and wonders, miracles—becoming a lot more accessible to people than it was probably 10 years ago. Hillsong, one of the biggest churches in the world, has movies and albums, and they're winning Grammys. You listen to their pastor speak, and you know he's Holy Ghost-filled. You hear Carl Lentz preach a message, saying, "Hey, we believe in

the baptism of the Holy Spirit. We believe in the power. We believe that God can raise the dead and open the eyes of the blind." But he's also best friends with Justin Bieber.

So I see a shift where the message of Pentecost, if we can call it that, is making its way mainstream. And it's becoming less weird. People used to identify the Holy Spirit as awkward or weird. I remember growing up, and anytime someone ever spoke about the Holy Spirit, they would be like, "And we're not talking about snakes and stuff like that." I never understood that, because I never grew up in a church where there were snakes! It just blew my mind that we even had to mention that to people. But they mentioned it a lot, because they wanted people to know we weren't that. But I think the movement is becoming something else now.

So I'm excited. I'm excited for the future, because I think people are open to experiencing God in a supernatural way—not just in a way that makes sense to my reason, which probably was the message of the generation before. Everything had to make sense and it had to be reasonable and rational.

The gospel still makes sense. It's still reasonable. It's still rational. But I think there's another dimension that people are really opening up to, and that's the supernatural. So I'm pumped. I think when we make space for God in that way, really cool things can happen.

Berglund: Why do you think that the next generation is finding signs and wonders so much more accessible than previous generations did?

Vasquez: Yeah, I think it's the figureheads that we have now. I think there's some people at the front of the movement who are contemporary and mainstream, who people admire and respect, and they're bringing it into everyday conversation. It's being talked about. I think that some of the bigger churches, the churches that have greater influence in our

church culture today, that people are following and are really having an impact, a lot of them are Spirit-filled churches. So it's just becoming more normal because it's becoming more present. It's just more around.

I mean, if you go back in the whole Holy Spirit movement, right, you're talking about the Azusa Street Revival in the early 1900s. But they were really on the outsides of society for the 1900s. Mainline churches still really had to lead: Protestant, Methodist, Lutheran, all those guys. There was still a slow decline over these last hundred years. And then where those churches declined, a lot of these evangelical churches where the Holy Spirit's a big part of the message picked up. So now, there's a shift.

Now in this second century here, we're just seeing a lot of those churches being planted and carrying influence in art, music and even sports. The more public it becomes, the more the message gets spread. The other day I was watching a regular TV show, and somebody was talking about speaking in tongues on NBC. Even if they were making fun of it, I think that tells us how far the message has come about who the Holy Spirit is. They try and make jokes on TV that everybody will get, so that the audience can laugh. It's mainstream now. People know, and people are open.

Berglund: Earlier, you talked about how the reporter came to your church and her story changed, because what she thought she knew about what was going on was completely different than the actual reality when she stepped into the church. I guess I'm wondering, from your perspective, what are some other ways that God is changing the story? What are some ways where our conventional wisdom about how people interact with the church is changing?

Vasquez: I think that's one way. There is the narrative of young people leaving the church, but they're not.

I'll tell you one of the ways I'm concerned about the story of the church changing. I think that has a lot to do with the political environment that we live in. I'm afraid. I think anybody who knows a Christian—a good, healthy, Bible-believing Christian—knows that we are for tolerance, that we may share our beliefs, but we're not going to try and change them. Because I think that's actually one of the core messages of Christianity. We're not going to try and change anything. That's God's job. God does the changing. God does the convincing. We're here to love, teach and serve.

So one of the ways that I'm concerned with the message of Christianity being told is when it's told in the context of bigotry, racism or hate. I definitely think there are people who carry the banner of Christ who don't represent him well. But that can be said about anything. Are all atheists evil? Absolutely not. But there are some who really make all atheists look bad. The same can be said for Muslims and Buddhists and any other group. I hope that people would have the wherewithal to understand that a segment of people who claim to have Christ as their Lord and Savior, that they don't represent us all. That they would do some research and know the story of Christianity and who Jesus was. He ate with the publican. He had lunch with the sinner and the tax collector and the prostitute, and He was for people. He loved people.

I'm afraid that in the next generation, there's going to be an idea that Christianity is hate-filled, and that if you don't agree with us, then you have no place with us. I don't believe that's the story of Christ at all. That's one of the ways I'm concerned about the story changing.

Berglund: Some of that is out of our control, but what parts of that are in our control where we can help prevent that story?

Vasquez: Understand what your world is. Where do you work? Where do you live? How are you representing Christ?

I don't put a lot of faith in social media. So my advice wouldn't be to make sure you like this or post that. I don't know that any of that changes anything. It's all just static out there. But what can we do in our own world? Who are we loving in our own world? Who are we making space for in our own world, at our table? How are we representing Christ in our families and in our friendships?

Everybody's looking for a platform nowadays. Everybody's looking for an opportunity. I think there may be a lot of preachers and pastors who put their sermons on YouTube in hopes of going viral and stuff like that. (And we do share clips through social media and all that.) But I think the best platform you could ever have is your neighbors.

Bob Goff had a huge influence on me. I met him a couple times, but just reading his books, I love how simple he makes loving people. He says, "I think loving your neighbor means loving your neighbor." And I laugh when I read that because it does, doesn't it? I have a neighbor. When's the last time I've done something for my neighbor?

Loving the people on your block. Loving the people you go to class with. Loving the people you work with—especially people who don't think like you or act like you. I think that's a great litmus test right there.

Who are your friends? Does everybody you hang out with look like you and think like you? If so, are we doing a good job? Who are we protecting as well?

I think there are just some great ways to check on ourselves. I definitely don't have it all nailed down myself, either. But I'm trying. And I think as long as we're all trying, we can have a tremendous collective influence.

Berglund: I think that's great. One more question for you. In your own quiet time, when you're spending time with the Lord, what has God been laying on your heart recently?

Vasquez: For me, I feel the Holy Spirit and God telling me to just be who He created me to be. We live in a day and age where, because of social media, because of the internet, because of the transfer of information, we have so much access. We can hear all the best preachers. We can see all the best pastors. I don't even have to go to the bookstore. I can download a book on my phone immediately. There are so many voices.

This isn't the question that you asked, but I think we're living in a generation of some of the greatest preachers we've ever heard. And we're not really appreciating it. Do you know why? Because of the access. I can listen to some of the best preachers in the world, then take that message, tweak it a little bit and preach it on Sunday, right? And it'd be great and we're all building on each other. We're all getting better. But the downside of that is that we might all start sounding the same. And I think God created me for my context and my people. By my people, I mean the people around me. And He created you for your people and your context. I think we all really need to trust that God didn't make a mistake when he made us.

He gave us the story that He gave us for a reason.

He gave us the gift that He gave us for a reason.

He gave us the talent that He gave us for a reason.

He gave us the friend that He gave us for a reason.

He gave us the job that He gave us for a reason.

Just own that and stop trying to be someone else somewhere else at another time or place. Just own it, man. Own it all. I think that's where our individual greatest influence and impact is going to be: in being ourselves.

When we moved to Winter Park, we talked about diversity. When

I did the study and found out the majority of Winter Park is older, retired Caucasians, I said, "I'm going to change my whole preaching style. I'm gonna go Andy Stanley up in here, you know? I'm gonna get a table, and I'm gonna get a board, and I'm going to just do Andy Stanley."

I love Andy Stanley. I thought people would appreciate that. But those first four months of our church were miserable. Miserable! People stopped coming. It wasn't that Andy Stanley's style of communicating is bad. It's that it's Andy Stanley's style of communicating, and I'm not him.

And so after the first four months, I was like, "You know what? I'm just going back to being me and what God created me to be." God created me to be a Latino, shouting-in-the-microphone type of preacher because I'm passionate and energetic, and that's who He created me to be. And then the church took a turn, and it started growing and it went great, and a big part of that turn was me just being OK with being me, with who God created me to be.

I would say to all of our readers—who are living in an age of comparison—to trust that God got it right when He made you. Everything that your community needs and that He needs in this day and age is in you. Just be you, whatever that means. That's where we're going to make the biggest difference.

I want to learn. I want to hear from other pastors. I meet with other pastors often; I'm always asking questions. But in the back of my mind, I have to remind myself that God created me very uniquely, and this city doesn't need another whosoever. They need me to be me.

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