

Rick Mullen

Executive Pastor

Morning Star Church; Lawrence, KS

Interview by Emily Stratton in Rick's office at Morning Star; Lawrence, KS

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Transcribed by Emily Stratton

Abstract: Morning Star Church is a relatively young non-denominational and spirit-filled (charismatic) church in Lawrence, KS. Its historical roots trace back to 1992 when a few recent University of Kansas Students began holding Bible Studies in their home in Lawrence, Kansas. It expanded into a church-plant a few years later, with multiple short-term locations around Lawrence and a focus upon ministering to KU students. By 2003, however, the church officially relocated to its own, permanent space out in northwest Lawrence and has been there ever since.

This interview features Rick Mullen, the Executive Pastor and former layperson in Morning Star. After hearing Rick's personal background in getting connected to Morning Star Church and transitioning his career at KU to full time ministry there, the remainder of the interview focuses upon Morning Star's history and development, its ministries, and its recent shifts into sending out leaders to plant churches in other parts of Kansas. Near the end, there are a few questions about Morning Star being a charismatic congregation, and how newcomers might respond to charisma, if they have not ever been around it before.

Note: interview questions and comments by Emily are written in **bold** type, while responses from Rick are in regular type.

So let's see, it is October 28th and we're meeting here at the Morning Star Church in Lawrence with Rick Mullen, the Executive Pastor here at Morning Star Church. And Rick we just want to tell you a little bit about the project, so let me read this thing for you [reads info brochure] ... So with that said, do you consent to participating in this project?

Yes.

Okay, great. Well then the first question we'll go through with, Rick, is just tell me a little bit about yourself, about your background, and how you ended up here in Lawrence.

Yeah, I came to Lawrence in 1996 to work at the University of Kansas in the Athletic Department, in the marketing and promotions area. I was from California, um, grew up out there all my life, went to school at Berkeley, and then worked at Berkeley for a year with the athletics. Um, I came out here and shortly after arriving here I was looking for a church, and felt compelled to look for nondenominational, charismatic type churches and came upon Morning Star. At the time, it was meeting on Sunday nights at 1st Southern Baptist Church at 19th and Naismith, that's where they were located at the time. And they were, they were renting some time there on Sunday nights for service. So that's how I first found Morning Star.

Um, I grew up in California and in the middle of my high school years really had a powerful encounter with Jesus Christ, where my life changed completely, and so it set my life on a whole

new course the next couple year of high school and then on through college. So, had really a great bunch of people out there who helped train me and disciple me, as people would say, and again, in God's word, how to live this life. And so, I was passionate about that. So when I came to Kansas for this job, felt led here to come take this job, that I was looking for people with that similarity.

Well, good deal.

Yep.

Um, let's see... why don't I have you tell me a little bit more about some of, yeah, if you could elaborate a little bit more about what led you, specifically, into coming in to this church and taking up a leadership position...that'd be great.

Yeah! That'd be great. Well, picking up from there, we started attending Morning Star and at the time it was probably thirty or forty people. And really started to connect relationally with people—there were a lot of folks our age. Um, the church had, even in its infancy, really where it came out of, was started on the KU campus, um, outreaching to college students and so forth. John McDermott and his wife Pam McDermott both were part of a campus ministry at KU, and they started the church in their own living room, after college a little bit in 1992, with a few core people. And it moved around from a few store fronts, and ended up, when I came on the scene four years later, it was meeting, as I said earlier, at the 1st Southern Baptist Church building, that's now somebody else's building on 19th and Naismith.

But um, yeah, so that's kind of the brief history of the church, how it started in someone's living room, with a passion to not only reach community, but to impact college students. And so that really resonated with me, I was probably twenty four at the time, and I had just gotten done with college, and, you know, really believed in that, as that was kinda my age group.

And so, there was a campus ministry going when I got here that was thirty, forty people, there was a community of young families, and some college students, and just really felt a connection. And honestly, I prayed about it, because I visited some other churches and was asking the Lord where he wanted to put me. Where would I be placed? Not just what I like the best, who has the best bells and whistles and, you know, new carpet or best sound. But, where was I supposed to be connecting with the people he wanted me to build with? And through the process of several months, just kind of felt like, yeah, this was it, and so we jumped in!

Just started serving, you know? Our, the church moved to Sunset Hill Elementary School, and that was a big step for us, you know, setting up, breaking down every Sunday morning at the church—at the school. And we started to grow, we had people reaching out to people, you know, our campus ministry was growing. And you know, I started leading, kind of a home Bible study with the church and just, just through relationships, really, is where I got grafted on board and really built bonds with people. Not only John, our pastor, but others. And, I'm just kinda going here... is that?

Yeah, by all means, keep going.

So, a few years of that, really felt a sense that, you know, that instead of me hopping from athletic department to athletic department around the country, really felt like God was wanting

me to stay here. So anyways, I took another position as a financial advisor in town with some guys, a couple of them, Christian men, who were in our church and invited me to join them. So I left my job at KU, and another gentlemen left is law job. We both jumped in together in this financial business. And this was back in 2000, and, kinda rocky times financially, then, and then 9/11 happened and the markets were crazy, but we were really fortunate and blessed by God in that we went right through that time really well and we grew our business. But part way through that, probably in 2003, really felt the call from God for me to do full time ministry. Now I always felt that I would always be like a lay leader, as they call it, and so a layman in the church who would be very involved in leadership, but really God was kind of breaking down that stereo type I had: 'well, I'll stay over here kind of in the secular area and also then serve sacredly,' but all of life is sacred. God has, you know, he doesn't compartmentalize things. So I had to kind of give God the stiff-arm in that regard, and he was able to get in there to me. And so what I did was that I started doing, kind of, part time pasturing here with John, and also doing my finance business until a couple years later. It was time, the church had grown to such a place that I needed to devote full time to it. And so, I gave my clients over to my partners and in 2006, I was here full time, in the capacity that I am now.

So, a little bit of a long story, but that's how I got to be where I'm at now.

That's not a long story at all. Um, so at what point did Morning Star move from the elementary school to over here where it's at now?

Good question. In 2000, ironically, right when I was doing all that job changing craziness, we felt like we needed to move to pursuing some land and building. Because we presumed we weren't going to be able to stay at the school very long. So we found some land, and someone anonymously donated the land to us. This land we found up here, in this Oakridge Estates area where there are 5-acre homes and, you know, really spread out neighbors, but this lot up here on the top of the hill, there wasn't going to be a house built on it. It was going to be more just an open—and so the developer offered it to us and we said, 'well, we gotta figure out how we're going to pay for this, you know?' And someone anonymously gave us the money, so we own the land, outright. Which was cool! That was a good step.

Well, we felt we needed, then, to start a building campaign to raise funds. Now this is one of the most tremendous stories, really, for our church because it was a tremendous faith move of God on our people that we wanted to raise \$600,000 to build a building. Well, we only had thirty? Forty giving units? Total, you know, if you took families as giving units. And they were young! I mean, we were all, I mean, like Barbara, I had just left my job, and like no income and a child? You know it was... so I was just one example of, 'okay, where's this going to come from?' But we really believed, we prayed, and we asked God to bless it. And so we asked people to seek God about what they should give over a three year period. We had \$460,000 pledged, of the \$600,000 goal. And that was amazing when you consider the number of giving units we had and the state of our church, you know, we had no retirees, really, nobody like that. So, 'okay now, where's it going to come from? People pledged it. Where's it going to come from? How's it going to materialize?' And God really moved in my wife's and my heart to really pledge way beyond what we could even imagine, and he was faithful to come through, and we were able to pay off our pledge in that time. And, I want to say we collected, it was an incredible amount, I mean, a lot of times these programs you'll have a lot of attrition, but I think 90, 95% of the money came in, which is, I mean, an incredible percentage of retainment, so to speak.

So, the building ended up being more than that, because whenever you start to build, the costs go up and then this... But, um, we were able to pay for, like, half of the building in cash, and then, you know, finance the rest of it to where we're now paying down, almost getting to closer to being done. And so that is how we moved from the grade school to here. And that was a big move! Because now you have your own building, your own land. It's a, it's funny, but people will sometimes perceive you differently that way. Not that we were looking for that, but, people just warned us, hey, they'll... when you're in a storefront, or a, you know, people have an impression. But we didn't really care much about impressions. We were just doing what we felt God was telling us to do.

So we built a building, and we built it as a multi-purpose building. So if you notice, our carpet has basketball lines on it, you know, like in it. So it not only serves as basketball and play place, but as our sanctuary as well. And then we've, over time, built out the rest of the classrooms around it. And then we purchased some other land adjacent to us and built a little baseball diamond and a volleyball pit and some, a lot of outdoor things because people like to come out here and enjoy it. So, yeah, so that to that March of, March 2nd, I think, of 2003 we moved into this building. And so it's been seven and a half years, and an incredible time! It's been really neat. I think we probably had, oh, maybe a hundred fifty people when we moved over here? From the grade school. And so, yeah.

Cool, well let's see, in, in moving, or I guess, growing pretty quickly from starting this in the early nineties as a college group to now having this building out here, has that changed kind of the focus of the church? I'm assuming, kind of, being a little bit further away from campus and being out in the country, it'll have more families in your population, your congregation, as opposed to students? Or does it still have a strong student focus? Or?

It does. We do. Mainly because our heart has always been to reach people, you know, to see them come into a relationship with Jesus Christ, to be trained and discipled in the ways of God and what the Bible calls, you know, kind of a 'kingdom living.' How do you live in the kingdom of God, here and now, on the earth? Not just in heaven. But, take that God's plan for the earth and for people is to live in his kingdom now. That there isn't this waiting for the sweet by and by, but there's, there's a life to live now. So training them up and then sending them out, whether to do church plants or missions overseas, or whatever it may be. And so that's been our heart.

You know, we've had words prophesized over us. In fact, when we moved into this building, we had someone prophesy over us that we would be um, three things: a sanctuary (a sense of a place where people come, you know, to find wholeness in the love of God), a seed of wisdom, and a sending place. And that word has really stuck with us. And it's amazing how God has allowed that word to come true, and you know, that our church would be those three aspects. A seed of wisdom, meaning, bringing the wisdom of God, and the ways of God, to people. And then a sending place, where, this isn't just a destination, but, you know, we don't talk about the four walls of this church being the church. We talk about it as being an equipping center. People come, they get filled up, they get trained, again, to go out to where they impact their world, their area of influence, and the campus being a big part of that for us.

So yeah, we have grown up, so to speak. Like, I'm no longer twenty four, but thirty eight with three kids and so my stage of life is different and we have a lot of folks in my realm. But we still have a lot of young people, because along the way, our heart has always been for the campus.

That we were here as a, as a community church, so to speak, but with an eye to reach the next generation on campus. And with that, we started a campus ministry plant down at K-State, we've done some things over in Kansas City, where we have a church –plant that started in Kansas City, so that's part of that sending out.

And we've got other people who have come through, who have gone to China, you know, Kyrgyzstan, Brazil, and we've always had a heart for international students, as well, ever since the church started, which is, which is really neat to see. I mean, you have a lot of the world coming to your doorstep at KU through the international student programs. And, we have students that reach out to them. And it's amazing to see so many of their lives get changed and touched by Jesus Christ. And when they go back to their own home countries, they're going to bring the message of God's word and of the kingdom of God to other people. So, that's really, kinda the really cool stuff that we, we love to see happen.

But we've changed a little, in that sense, but really that was the heart of being a place where we want to reach people who are far from God, who don't have a relationship with God, to train and disciple them, to send them out to whatever God's calling on them. That has not changed. And so, we are as vibrant and, I think, energized about that as ever.

You just caught me, we just got done with a couple big planning sessions for the future, where we're going, and... Just it's amazing how God will continue to bring to focus the things that he's told us he wants us to be, what he's given us—oh, how do you say it—our particular mission, you know, and helps us to stay focused on that, and to see the—to sow and to reap. You know, you sow, and it takes time, but then you reap.

Now the youth, the high school campuses, the college, it's still very big for us, as well as reaching out to community people.

Cool, well what are some of the tangible forms as to how you get those outreaches going? So, in the college, um, aspect? Do you have, like, groups that meet on campus? Or how do you, how do you get people involved? Or those international students? How do you get them connected?

That's great, yeah. Well, our campus ministry is called Midwest Student Ministries. And they are a separate 501(c)3, but they're very connected with us, church-base. They're really what started out of our church. They still have some offices right here in our building. But we have, what it is, is like this: Our staff on Midwest, they raise their own partnership development teams. In the essence, they go out and raise their own salary. They visit with their friends, their family, get referrals, and they tell them what their mission is. So they're not paid by our church, but they really feel a call from God to be a minister to the campus and so they go, and they spend probably six months to nine months, maybe, a year, raising their support. They call it their Partnership Team: people who will pray for them, people who will support them financially so they can do full-time campus ministry. We got, oh goodness, one, two, three, four, five... maybe five or six that reach out to KU? And we've got a couple—a family—in Kansas City, and one out in Manhattan. So that's what they do. That gives you the backdrop.

So that frees them up to do full-time ministry on campus. So what they do is, there is a weekly campus meeting that they bring people together in the Burge Union, right now is where they're meeting. But it goes way beyond that. I mean, they go out and they try to reach scholarship hall students, dorm students, sorority, fraternity, dance and music hall students, whatever...

athletic students, we have people who have been in athletics who have come to know Jesus Christ and then go back into the ministry and then they want to reach athletes. So it's really about relationships. They will go to where they feel God's leading them to connect with people, and one on one, start building relationships with people, and gathering them, and bringing batches of people together.... For one on one Bible studies, ministry time, hanging out time, it's not always... it, it's really holistic in that approach. And then 'hey! We got a great, we got a campus meeting going on,' and then they come and they see other students, okay, and then they hear that God, the message of the kingdom, and many times they'll come here to church, too, because of the connection. So we'll see many students floating in here on Sunday morning that are involved in the campus ministry. That's how we, kinda, connect.

And we really feel there's something that's been a real heartbeat of our church has been this. When college students come, they're away from their family, some are at great distances, some, you know, out of state, some are, you know, whatever. But they come and establish their own, new family here. College students, getting around, like a family, like, let's say mine, for example, with three kids running around and... we have them over for dinner. And they see the dynamic of a family working. Whether they've seen it work in their home or not, or maybe it's very different from what they notice in their home, but, there's a connection there. And I remember, in college, being around families and I was drawn to this. I would go have some dinner with some families, and just get all—like my eyes would be wide open. I'd be, 'how does this all work?' You know? I know my experience, from my family growing up... well here's a 'Christian' family, you know, that's loving Jesus, this is what it looks like. And you'd be amazed, the students that come, they either don't have that background, or that foundation at all, or they really... it's a real guessing game on what life's supposed to look like. What does it mean to be married and love your wife or husband? Raise children? So that's a really cool relational thing that a lot of our students have always said when they leave, that was one of the biggest things, that was not only connecting with college students, but these families, welcomed me around and I mingled with them, sometimes I'd baby-sit their kids or other times I'd just come over and eat and meet them. So, that's another connection point that has been really important.

Now, as far as international students, well, we have this one gal, Chei Lin, she's been with the church, really, from the beginning. She's from Malaysia, and she's been in our campus ministry since it began. She has a serious heart for international students. And so she does something on Friday nights, just for them, called Nation to Nation. And it's a way where they come and fellowship with food, like in a house setting, in her house, so they're meeting... these thirty, forty international students crammed in her house, just hanging out, from all over the world. Europe, Asia, India, South America... then they'll talk about the word of God, they'll bring a message that the international students can understand. But it's a real relational connected time. You've got Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Atheists, all sorts of ones coming. And there's just relationship that starts all of it. We've had an international Thanksgiving dinner for like fourteen or fifteen years here, and we're about ready to start planning it again, where two hundred international students will come have dinner at our church on the Tuesday night before Thanksgiving and hear a message about why this country is what it is and why we celebrate Thanksgiving, and the roots of it.

So, there's just branches like that. So the international students, then, get mingled in. It's all part of Midwest Student Ministries, but they do have a special night where it's kind of more appealing to them, where they may feel more comfortable meeting other students.

Does that help?

Yeah! Definitely. That's great.

Let me know if I'm talking too fast or too much...

No no no no, you go right ahead! Um, I'm interested in hearing a little bit more about the church-plants in Manhattan and Kansas City. So how long ago did those start up? And were they people directly sent from this church body itself? And...

Exactly. We really believe that most, I would say everybody that's ever been brought into leadership or gone into full time, they've been a part of this group. You know it's one thing to go and hire people from the outside and do the whole interview, but it's another thing when you train them up yourselves. And you kind of like... it's kind of like the old, if you think about the Hebrew way, where they used to take an apprentice and train them and they did everything with that person and then they would, basically, they became like that apprentice, you know, the person they were mentored by. And they were fully developed. They were like, 'I, I can do this.' That model is so much more real to the way that God wants to build, than just inviting someone from all over the place. And, 'yeah! Give me your resume, let's see who you are!' Because that's really, when you're relational, you've got, you know the people, you know their background, you know who they are.

And so, yeah, Jonathan and Reagan, they were part of our campus ministry, who went on as full-time campus ministers. They've been down to Manhattan, then they were in St. Louis for a year, to do something there, and then have come back. And they've been down there I think, maybe, going... they've established a church now, along with the campus ministry, called Bluemont Church. And I'm not exactly sure what year that was, but I know it's been at least five years. It's still a small church plant, and there's, you know, it's still getting its legs under it.

Same thing in Kansas City. That started out of, again, a young man who came, was, actually playing professional football for the Chiefs but had been connected with some ministry that we were connected with and was in a campus ministry at Florida State. Well when he got drafted by the Chiefs and came up here, he kinda connected with us because we knew of his home church and his home affiliation. We got connected with him, and then after a few years he wasn't going to play football any more, so he felt called to go into campus ministry. So we got him trained, we got him going in it. And he was living over there with his wife and said 'what if we started something in your living room?' Just we, we were having a lot of our students come through our ministry here, graduate, and then move over there. Strong Christians, wanting to do something... so we said, 'what if... we kind of took this core group of people who were getting jobs in Kansas City and moving back there and start, try and form, maybe, church-plant and-or campus ministry?' So he started reaching out to like, Avola College and UMKC... and then Dave and Becky who were from here, who went to Manhattan with Jonathan and Dave, Jonathan and Reagan, decided 'hey, we would go over there.'

So, John and I were going over to the city every Sunday night after here on Sunday morning and doing church over there with them, in somebody's living room. Well that gets kinda tiring. It's difficult to maintain. Plus, they needed somebody more on the ground, pastoral, to help them. So Dave and Becky felt the call to go do that. So they went from Manhattan over there. So Jonathan and Reagan stayed there and Dave and Becky came over here to kind of pastor the church and, Brett and Sarah, the campus ministers, went alongside with them. And so that church has been going, probably, four years too, I would think? And they're meeting over in a grade school. That's called City Life Church.

But we're still relationally connected. That's really how it works.

Well good, so then... each of those will just continue growing and maybe having their own sort of building, kind of like here, as they grow, or however it ends up being like?

That is our hope. You know our, our heart is that we continue providing opportunities for people to lead. And so, that may mean another campus plant somewhere... maybe... who knows. Stillwater, Oklahoma? Aims, Iowa? Somewhere... Columbia, Missouri? You know, maybe one of these major campuses around the states around this area? So, that's what we look forward to.

Yeah, so then how do you train leaders? How do you select those people to send out? Or, is it just people that feel the call coming up to you and saying, 'hey, this is what I'm feeling led... how can we work with this?' or is it something that you see in something in other people? Or is there a specific protocol for when somebody is ready to take on this certain role or not? What all does that break down to?

Great. We're, we're much more relational and organic than that. We aren't in a sense, I don't know what I mean by 'organic,' but it is really, life to life. For instance, you're with a group of college students and you see them being faithful and diligent, you know, they're obedient to God's word, and you can see them living the life, and you see them reaching out and influencing their peers and their friends. And many times you'll sense from God that there's a pretty good call on their life to do something in the ministry. It may not be forever, but for even just a few years, you know, to reach out and do campus ministry. And many times you'll prod, or give them a poke, and say, 'hey, what do you think about this? Why don't you pray about this? We see the potential in you.' And, you know? We let them do that. And sometimes it is, man, they're fired up and there's a passion then because they're doing it, kind of, as volunteers, anyways, out of the, out of following Jesus, that they're doing that to their friends already. You know, reaching out to them. It's like, 'wow, yeah! I can see God's gifted me this way. I want to continue to do this. And, if I can do it and sustain a living, you know, and be able to do this full-time, what my heart's really about, and have some kind of support behind me, then I'll do it.'

But it's not for the weak of heart, though. Um, to go raise a partnership team is a big step of faith. And they learn a lot about themselves, they learn a lot about trusting God and, through what they do not see, when they get told 'no.' No, I won't support you. Or no, I can't. And it's really a process. It is almost like a refining by fire. So it's not like, 'yeah, I'm just going to go into the ministry and hunky dory.' No, we give them some training, we send them away to a boot-camp, so a kind of boot-camp where they learn how to raise support, and then they are devoted to that. They don't do any campus ministry until they reach their goal. It's kind of that singleness of thought. Where, um, it's hard to do ministry and then, 'oh by the way I'll do my stuff.' We tell them, 'you go and raise your support team, your Partnership Team, full till, and when you're done, then you'll step on the campus. So that's why they step out of the scene for six months, or what have you. Because they've got to, they've got to really focus and have all their faith going towards that development.

So it's amazing. We see the trials and tribulations they're going through in that and the struggles and the victories... what it produces in them. It's really almost an indicator of how they'll be in ministry, as well. The, the resilience, and endurance, and perseverance.

And so, it's been great. And they're so strong coming out of it. And their, their depth with God is so much richer. So then, full-till, we celebrate 'yeah!' and then off they go!

We have weekly meetings with them, you know. The Midwest Staff we meet every week. We, as a church leadership, we have prayer meetings once a week where we just talk about, you know, 'how's it going? What's going on? What's exciting? What have you gotten into?' So you know, so we'll meet for an hour, hour and a half. And we're just really a tight group in that sense, there's a lot of communication going on and... You know, a lot of people in leadership have been on campus at one time, so they can give advice or training or help.

Cool, um, are there any instances of any sort of conflict in terms of direction when you have someone that is sent out and doing their thing, and they you come in your meeting and you're like 'I'm not really sure if the direction that you're running with is of God,' or how is this, have you ran into any tensions? Or does it seem to be pretty, pretty supported by all people in these committees? Or... I don't know if I'm clear enough in that question.

No no no, there's been times, over the years, where, you know, somebody wants to go this direction, but that's not really the heart of where we feel God is leading us. You know, we usually have amiable partings, where it would be 'we want to bless you. If that's the direction you're going, then go for it. We just don't see it operating under where we're heading.' So yeah, there's been that kind of thing. There can be conflicts in that regard.

I will say, fortunately for us, I believe it's because, you know, God has kind of branded on our heart early on that the key is relationships and working out conflict. And this, by the grace of God, our church has not experienced those church splits, those problems that we hear. I'm not saying that we're better than other people, hear me, for sure, I'm not saying that. I, I believe it's because we spend—we try to spend a lot of time branding peoples' hearts with this idea that relationships matter. And when we are in relationships with people, it's not a disposable relationship. It's a committed relationship, where you have to look at your differences. It's not 'if' you get hurt, it's 'when.' I mean, we speak very clearly about this. It's when the offense comes, what will you do? Because, look, you know, the Bible calls the devil the accuser of the brethren. The accuser brings accusation. About someone else's someone else. So it may be just circumstance, but many times there is a spiritual element going on where the enemy, the devil, wants to kill, steal, and destroy. He wants to destroy relationship. So he's going to come and accuse. So, these are foundational things to us.

And so there are times in that we have to work out our conflict. And I think that's been, yeah, it's not easy, but we try to help people see. Open your eyes wide open and it's not if you get hurt, it's when, and what are you going to do about it. What are you called by God to do by his word? Not because someone else is telling you. So, but yeah. There are times when people have moved on and gone on. You know, I can say that most of them have been pretty amiable. Where, some have felt called to move on! Hey, there's like, most recently, our Kansas City folks, he's from Florida. And he felt called to go to Florida and help with this youth center that was in Miami, stationed in Miami. A Christian youth center was going to reach out to people all over. So now we're in a relationship with him. You know, they're not officially through the Midwest Student Ministries anymore, but it goes beyond just that affiliation because they're our friends. So we care about what they're doing. You know, yeah, we miss them here, but you know, they're feeling what God's called them to do down there. That's what they're supposed to do next, and so does that make sense?

That really helps. Those are the good ones. There are times when you don't stay in contact with some people, but that has been more of the minimal types. But yeah, we do send... people do send. Hopefully those are all good sends. When there is conflict, most of the time it gets worked out. But if it can't be, and someone feels genuinely about going that direction, then we say 'go for it.' You know? They won't fit under our tent, but you know, they'll fit under another tent. So, go for it.

Okay. Let's see... branching out of, I know I was kind of honing in on that college end, and church planting in the college situations, topic for a while. But what about the rest of the church? What other ministries and organizations do you have in terms of children, or working with adults, married couples, what kinds of... do you have small-groups? Or home Bible studies? How does that work out in this church?

Different things. We've done, tried, and attempted different things over the years. Um, I can speak currently, you know, we really believe in this idea of personal discipleship. See, people get corporately discipled by coming to meetings, or Sunday service, or trainings or seminars. And there's an impartation of God's word in a corporate sense, and that is so valuable. But the other side, is the personal side, where there is someone who is committed to you. They're intentional toward you about helping you. They have... they give you attention, and they're there for you. That was really what I received when I became a Christian when I was a late teenager. It was incredible. And when I got to college, I thought every Christian got this when they get saved. And it was not that way.

I was, my jaw dropped. I got to school and I thought, 'Lord why, why doesn't everybody have what I just got for the last two years? Why did you do that?' And I just felt the Lord speaking, saying, 'what I've done for you I want you to do for other people.' So that, my heart for discipling other people has been there. So when I met up with this group, that was their heart.

So when I talk about personal discipleship, I'm talking about—you have to be in people's lives. You have to be there for them. You know, it's kind of like, through the thick and the thin, you can't just tell people what to do, you have to teach them, which means... I give the example, I can tell my children to tie their shoes till I'm all blue in the face. But until I'm willing to kneel down, get in their life, and show them, methodically, how to make the loop, tie the shoe, here's how you do it, well nothing changes. So I can tell people to do a lot of things, but until I'm willing to invest in someone's life and get down in the dirt with them, things don't change. And that's really where transformation comes about in peoples' hearts.

So with that, I gave you the backdrop. So anything we try to do we want to make it not just structuring programs. Well yes, you have to have some structure, you have to have some balance, but we try to have people, in their hearts, look outward to other people as much as they can. So we do things like—for instance, recently we started to really want to reach out to men in our church. Okay, a lot of them are married, some are single, but you know what, we need to start with these men. We need to get them, you know, on fire, with a vision for the kingdom of God, not just for their own life, but beyond their life. So what are we going to do with that? That's our goal.

So we've started these, kind of groups where it's like, okay, say we've got twenty leaders, lay leaders in the church. 'Who do you feel God connecting you to? Give us some names.' ... 'ah, these three names.' ... 'okay, great. You and those three guys, you start meeting. And go

through this material.' We've created our own literature, too. We do our own training materials. 'Start investing in them. Not only just teaching them the material.' That's only like 40% of it, the other 60% is really about your life relationship with them. Calling them. Texting them. Finding out how they're doing. Being there when they have trouble. Someone they can count on. So that's kinds where it... there is some structure to it, but we're trying to make it organic and real and more grassroots, as well. And it, you know, on the campus that happens. Through, kind of the Kingdom Living Groups, we call them, you know? We're doing it with the men.

The youth, the same way with our youth. We have a couple Midwest Student Ministry folks who focus on teenagers and same idea. It's kinda, it doesn't change much. The idea that you've got to have one on one connection with people. You can't just have a nice big program and expect change to happen. So that's what our focus is on.

We really, in a sense, are trying to stay in the running lanes that God has given us. We can try to be a grocery store where you walk in and there's every product and every choice you can imagine, and some people will view a church to do that. They will come to church like the grocery store. You should have these products on the shelf, and if you don't, then why don't you? Now we can get distracted by that, but we've really tried not to. We can't be all things to all people. We have to be who God's called us to be and that reach out, you know, that's our sweet spot, or the area that he's given us.

And so really the challenge for leadership is to stay with your eye on the ball. Because there's this 'will you do this, do this, do this, you need this ministry, you need this ministry'... we can't do it all. In fact our mantra has been that unless there is a leader, from in our midst, who rises up and says 'I want to take the lead on this,' we're not going to do it. It doesn't, it shouldn't fall on the leadership of the church, because they're called the 'clergy.' We try to dispel that really quickly. Because it says 'Pastors, teachers, evangelists, prophets, they are to equip the saint's work of service.' Not do the work of service. People get that backwards, I think, in America in church now. Well, 'hey there, those people on staff, they'll do everything for us.' Wait... 'our job is to equip you to do the work! Which means if you have a heart for helping people with their marriages, go! You do marriage ministry! You have a heart to help people going through divorce? Yes, this couple, this family that has been through a divorce before, they did it.' We are the wind at their back, but it's not our—not mine, or John, or other staff's—job to do it. So ministry, we believe, comes out of people who rise up and say 'this is a passion of mine. I want to do this. Will you help me?' ... 'yeah!'

So, I just say that because, you know, people... that's what's happened. These are lay people. And that's the way it should be. They bear the weight of ministry. So, um, that's kind of where we're at with what we're kind of going after.

Um, we do some classes, more on that corporate side where... you know, people will work towards being a member in our church by taking some classes and then meeting with a pastor, and they understand more about who we are. But that's kind of our strategy.

Okay, so say I walk in on a Sunday to come to a morning service. What am I going to expect to see and what will people do to get me connected into this body?

That's good. You'll probably be said hello to quite a few times. I, I say that because that's what the feedback we've gotten says. Even from when I was here, and people were coming up to me when I first came in, being very open and friendly. And we get that comment a lot: 'man! Your

people are really friendly.’ And then not just shake your hand on Sunday, you know, there’s that awkward time in church where everyone turns around and greets somebody... you know it’s always like ‘peace be with you... and also with you.’ Okay. Ours is more like... it’s rowdy! I mean, yeah, you can feel uncomfortable, but we try to, we kinda break through the ice on that. It’s a pretty friendly place, welcoming place.

Um, you’re going to find some really good coffee from Guatemala. Because one of our lay guys, he had a heart to go help these people co-op in Guatemala to give them a fair wage, and now he has this thing where he ships coffee in. So I’ve heard that it’s good coffee.

Are you not a big coffee fan?

No.

Aw, you’re missing out!!

But no, you’ll get greeted.

It, it is a very contemporary worship and praise. Actually a lot of college students are on the worship team. We, we want to exhort God and—I mean, exalt him, that’s more the word. Praise him. And just in an interactive, passionate worship.

But then there’s that greet time, you fellowship, get comfortable with people, and then really a message that will be very engaging, and hopefully very timely, but applicable. We want to present vision. Sunday morning is a time to present vision. It is yes, also for application, but it is also a time to put vision before people. To say this is the picture of the kingdom of God. This is the rich, and the real life that is there for you. We can’t do everything on Sunday morning, but we can present vision. And get them, get their eyes up onto something that then, they can personally with God wrestle through during the week or with somebody they’re meeting with. So, it’s a pretty vibrant place. Pretty active. A lot of little kids running around. It is...

And so we have a children’s ministry, you know, to minister to the kids on Sunday mornings all the way up until like 4th grade, and then our 5th and 6th graders meet, um, once or twice a month. But most of the time they’re in the main meeting with us. Because they’re old enough to experience that.

And so it’s a pretty vibrant place. You’ll see a lot of young people, you’ll see a lot of young marriages, families, you’ll see—we’re getting a few grandparents now—but that’s kind of the make up and I guess, demographic, for official word, for our church. The feel will be pretty welcoming, definitely.

Um, let’s see, a little bit earlier when you were just talking about your background, you mentioned looking for a nondenominational and charismatic church. So how, how does the topic of charisma fit into Morning Star? What are the spiritual gifts that you look at and how is the topic of spiritual gifts embraced?

Yeah. When you come... when we say ‘charismatic,’ it means, really, the idea of the full expression of the Holy Spirit, from words of prophecy, to speaking in tongues, to praise and worship, to all those types of other gifts and things. So we don’t shy away from that. Words of knowledge when you’re praying for people? We believe the gifts of the Holy Spirit are living and

active today. So that's how I, in a nutshell, speak, say the charismatic. And that's what we believe. We believe that the Holy Spirit does want to speak to people today, that he has a real life-giving encounter with you. So, that's what I would say, um...

Nondenominational, meaning, yeah. Just what that means. We are not affiliated, so to speak with, a denomination, but it's out of the orthodox Christian faith is where these churches are coming out of. You know, the apostle's creed. That's really orthodox faith. And so, that's when I say charismatic, you're going to see people raise their hands, they're going to shout and sing and pray... you know, you wouldn't describe us as Pentecostal, in the sense that, you know, some people wonder when they hear charismatic, what's it going to be like? You know, there's ranges of that. And um, but yeah. So, yeah, we believe in the gifts of the Holy Spirit and how it all plays out.

You know, sometimes people will prophesy. But not all the time. In our smaller meetings that happens a lot more. You know, um, praying over somebody. But we welcome that. We believe Jesus wants to move in his power, even today, with miracles and signs and wonders. That's how I would describe the full expression of the Holy Spirit.

Yeah, um, for those that, that haven't been around churches that embrace the gifts of the spirit or see them being carried out in today... how do you deal with the discomfort that some people might have towards it?

Yeah, it's... exactly right. There is sometimes a lot of that! Though we were just doing a class with some student leaders, and it was about the idea of the spirit, the soul, and the body. The idea is that we want to be spirit governed. Yet our soul, many times, wants to rule our mind or rule our emotions. So when something feels funny to us, we think, 'well how can that be God?' Yet many times, if we're soul-driven, we'll miss the things of God that he wants us to see. We might have mental strongholds where 'I just can't do that,' ... 'well, why not?' ... 'well that's just the way'— 'well, do you think God wants it to stay that way? Or is that just a product of how you've come in your life to this point?' You know when God says about renewing the mind, you know, be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Many times, we come with preconceived, or, presuppositions, so to speak. So yeah, we deal with that a lot.

We talk to people about, oh, you know, 'what does the word of God say about this? Are we saying anything different from what the word of God says or displays?' You know what I mean, in that regard? And yeah, we wrestle with it! Last week we were talking to these students about 'why is this...I believe in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but yet I don't believe, I never have this experience.' So, okay, 'what do you think is keeping you from that? Is it, you know, is it your mind? Or is it you just feel uncomfortable? Or?' So yeah, we wrestle about that.

And you know, really, I always come to this place. It's not Rick Mullen trying to share his thought. I'm really, really just showing what the word of God says, and saying if this was true for them, why is it discontinued now? Or off the shelf today? That's not the kingdom of God that is spelled out through history, throughout God's history. That he just kinda pulled the plug on things and now we operate differently. You know Jesus said 'it's better that I go, that the Holy Spirit I sent you, and you will do greater things than I.' Greater things? I mean, you take those words and you can't get around the fact that there's supposed to be some dynamic stuff happening with the power of the Holy Spirit.

I believe the Holy Spirit's not on vacation. Or tired. Or running without energy. I believe it's us as the vessel of that that has to be renewed and be able to receive it. You know, the rich ruler came to Jesus and he said, 'I've followed all your commands,' and 'Okay, go and sell all you have and follow me.' And he went away sad. Well what was that guy's issue? He had followed the letter and the law, he was in the game, so to speak, but he didn't. He could not do that. There was a, Jesus had gone right to the heart of the one thing that maybe this man, the thing that was maybe number one in his heart, and he couldn't walk away from it. So, we wrestle with that. That's our, our soul and our body saying, 'look, I don't want this,' or 'I don't believe in that.'

So kind of a long, long answer.

Yeah, no no no, I'm glad to hear it. And then, this question will actually jump way back to the beginning, I kind of glossed over some of the early days you had mentioned when you first joined up. And there was those thirty to forty people or so that comprised it. Um, what originally brought those people together? What, was it, again this idea of having discipleship? And really just bringing people together? What originally got this group going?

That's a good one. That's a great question. Um, I believe it was the vision to see the kingdom of God advance on the earth. That it wasn't about just, it really is about the idea, or the vision of the kingdom. That reaching campus, changing peoples' lives, okay God is moving, and his plan for the world is increasing, and I want to be a part of it. Even if it's thirty people. The faith it, it doesn't matter whether it's ten thousand people or not. The vision, if it's true, it's true, and how are you going to live it out?

So that's really what brought the first five people together in the living room, listening to cassette tapes for praise music, you know? And they'd have a Bible... a meeting! A church, some Sunday services, you know, passing the offering bucket around to five people, you know, that's church! And then it grew from there. But it was really a brown and central idea that God is moving and he wants to do things and he wants to use us. He wants to use his people. And, it's funny. You fast forward all the way to today, though I wasn't there in '92 (I came in '96), there is still the same heart in the movement. That the kingdom of God is advancing and God wants us to build his kingdom. Not just sit around and be thankful that we're going to heaven someday, and that is really, that is a great thing. That is a great, eternal vision. But at least Jesus said the kingdom is at hand. It is now, it is in the midst. Um, he was ushering something in, a lot different, you know.

You look around, there's a lot of evil and difficulty to see, yet that's kinda why we're here! You know. Anyways, I would say, it was the central, central theme and vision that...and not every people, not everybody views it that way, or sees it that way. And so that was the motivation, that motivated those people to join together, who believed that they could build something.

Is there ever any resistance, in the idea of, if you're always sending out and doing these church-plantings, that, is there... do you ever get any people that will say, 'well, why are you starting new churches when there are other churches around? Why not just join with those congregations and help them out?' Um, how do you handle that, or does that even come up?

Well, we've only got a couple church-plants, so it's not like we're going to get that very much. But you know, we want those to be successful. We want them to grow, you know, before we do more. And once you start to grow and be successful... I don't know, we don't come into too much conflict with that. I mean, there's that big question many times that, 'why are there so many denominations of churches? Why don't they just all get together as God's people?' You know, there is uniqueness to tribes, you know? I mean, I've run this town and there's a lot of great Christian, orthodox Christian, evangelical churches. You know, we love the Mustard Seed! You know, we have a great relationship with them. Heartland, though they changed their name, Pastor Paul Gray. The Wesleyan Church. You know, we associate. We, we know these pastors, and yet, we're kind of in the same flock, but maybe just different tribes of that flock?

And yeah, I don't get that very much, honestly, so about all I can...

I figured there probably wasn't much, but I thought I'd ask and see, just in case. Ok well, we're getting close to an hour, so I just want to finish up by asking, are there any memorable stories, any big highs or tough challenges that you've worked through in your experience that you'd like to share?

Um, well... I... that's good. That's good.

I know, it's hard to think about on the spot.

No I meant to do it earlier, and I just, that moment when we felt like, when we got that land, there was something about the vision that God wanted to do that was beyond us and, how could we afford it. That was a real faith marker. Kind of a memorial stone that you put in the ground and you look back and say, 'that was...what happened in that core group of people that their faith was there to stretch, to sacrifice, to believe God through what they did not see?' That was a big deal. For corporately, as a church, and in my own life. I look back and my, my walk and transformation, was tied into that with some key things. So, that was really cool.

Um, stories... man. We have a fun time around here! I mean we, we just... I'm trying to think of some of the great ones.

You know, there was one, this was even back when we were still in the Y2K, we're meeting in the grade school, and, you know, that night comes—New Year's Eve—and we went down a block to another church that would allow us to use their building. We wanted to throw a Y2K party at our church. So, at that time we had about four Life Groups going on, you know, at the time, and we said, 'well everyone's going to do a skit!' you know? And then come, and present. It was one of the funniest, craziest nights... because we were there, we were all young, some of us probably had an infant baby, but we were... and man! We did some parodies and skits that only us would understand and laugh about. And we were just rolling. That was just a real memorable night. We must have been there for five hours. But it was kinda like that, kind of that relational building that Y2K, that no, the world's not going to end! You know, there were Christian thoughts out there that 'oh my gosh! It's going to be crazy!' so, we were all like, 'welp, it's midnight! The lights are still on...' But you know, we had a fun time. And it's not anything that big of deal, but memorable times together when we were going... even now as we're older, and bigger, where you may not know everybody, just kind of attending the church that are coming in and sampling or, you know, we still have a really good time.

I'm just trying to, it's hard for me to think off the top of my head... some highs and some lows...

You know, we don't really tie those things to numeric numbers or things like that, but those are some big faith stretches for us, over the years, was moving into this building and...

The other highs are seeing the people that have come through here, that God has launched into things. And that doesn't always have to be full-time ministry. It can be, you know, people starting a... you know, one of our guys started a sports ministry for young people. Another guy is over there working with the underground church in China, like a central conduit to the rest of the world... he helps train leaders. I mean, that's amazing stuff and he was here with us, you know? We still stay in a relationship with him.

So those are some of the highs, are seeing...

Another gall, miss Shelly, she's now with YWAM in Brazil, and she was just here giving her, sharing an update, she's going back after two months, kinda, rest. Just seeing her and what she's doing to reach these street kids in Brazil, these teenage boys, is really cool!

Those are some of the highest highs is seeing the people who come through and seeing God transform their life. And then go out and be doing great things around the planet.

You know, so, I mean, I'm speaking for myself. You could interview someone else and they may say different things, but, the memories that we sit around the campfire and laugh about are just more personal, funny things that we've experienced. You know, when we've gone, we've gone on some retreats... when we were smaller, we'd do church-wide retreats off to like where there's like a little hotel or somewhere, we'd go out and play like this big kickball game after we'd eat this big BBQ and wives and husbands and students and just goofing off and, you know, funny stuff like that... Kickball, throwing the ball at each other and goofing off and one story, this just came up the other day, was so funny. One of our dear friends, he threw the kickball at his wife, to his pregnant wife, and she tripped and fell over it... you know, man! To this day this is a story we will never forget! The day that he threw the kickball as she was running to first base and... just you know, those are more things that bond us together, that we just remember from going on trips together and doing things. So.

Totally. Well good deal. Well let me conclude then just by asking, is there anyone else that you think I should get in contact with, or, any names that you would recommend? Either to hear some stories about this church's history, or anyone beyond this church too, that you think would have some stories to tell?

Oh, good question. ...and you're specifically wanting to talk about nondenominational churches?

Um, that's what I, personally, am most interested in, but...

Well, you've already talked to some of the ones that I would send you to, as far as that goes. Oh shoot... I mean, I could send you to other ministries and stuff? But, that's, that wouldn't stay focused on what you're doing.

I can go into other ministries, too...

Well, yeah, it's just... I don't know, I'm thinking about... have you talked to Paul Gray?

No, not yet.

It used to be Heartland Community Church, but now it's like New Life in Christ. It's on Vermont. Next to Dempseys. He might be a good one. He's been in this town for a long time. He has an incredibly unique and amazing story too. He was a musician. I would maybe try to get some face time with him. Because he... he planted that church a long time ago. You know, maybe twenty years ago, and could tell you the history of it, kind of, you know, a nondenominational church. I would talk to him if you haven't yet. He's a neat guy, he's a neat guy. He's a guy with a great story.

So there's my recommendation to you!

Cool! Yeah, no, that's awesome. Thank you.

And it's easier to bike to him!