

Brandon Brillhart

Founder and Lead Pastor

Relevate Church; Lawrence, KS

Interviewed by Emily Stratton at Panera Bread, Lawrence, KS

July 18, 2013 at 7:45am

Transcribed by Emily Stratton

Abstract: Relevate Church was planted in Lawrence, Kansas in 2012. This interview features Brandon Brillhart, the founder and lead pastor of Relevate. Questions discuss several aspects of planting Relevate: why Brandon began Relevate and the vision he had for planting the church; what steps, logistically, were required to begin the church (assessment processes, sources of funding, marketing); challenges that Brandon faced and continues to face through choosing to plant “parachute” style; and hopes for where the church will be headed as it gets more established in Lawrence.

Note: Interview questions and comments by Emily are written in **bold** type and Brandon’s responses are in regular type. Since the interview took place in a café setting, there is slight music in the background and occasional noises from the kitchen and other customers. It does not significantly affect the audio, however.

So it’s July 18 in the morning—about 7:45am—and we are at Panera Bread. I’m here with Brandon Brillhart, the lead pastor of Relevate Church, and we’ll go ahead and get going on the interview! So Brandon I know when we had been talking a little bit earlier, you said you moved from Pennsylvania, but if you could give a little more background about where you’re from and how you got connected into the ministry, so we can get to know you as a person, that would be awesome.

My dad is a pastor in Topeka, Kansas. I’m a PK (Pastor’s Kid), so I’ve been around ministry my whole life. I was a youth pastor for about twelve years. Then I took a position as pastor of family ministries, and I did that for about six years and wrestled with God’s call in terms of Lead Pastoring. I was offered by about three churches to pastor. Established churches, you know. I didn’t really feel like that was God’s will for my life, so we decided to plant.

We didn’t really want to come back to Kansas, so we looked at Florida and South Carolina, and nothing seemed to open. So... I’ve always loved Lawrence. I said, when I was 22 years old, that I was eventually going to pastor a church in Lawrence. It was kind of our joke because we knew that we didn’t necessarily want to move back to Kansas, but in the end, my wife came to me and said, “it’s Kansas. It’s always been Kansas.”

So, we moved back to Lawrence and began this great, crazy adventure. So yeah.

Took a little... took about 18 years—well, since I was 22, and when I moved here I was 38—so it took about 20 years to actually live here. So. Anyway, not quite 20 years, but.

Yeah.

We made it.

Yeah, well tell me a little bit more about feeling the call to come out here and when to plant and why and kind of making that transition to move back to Lawrence and...

Um, the wrestling with the call was, like I said, as a staff person I think you carry out somebody else's vision for the church, like, the Lead Pastor. At most every church I've worked at, the Lead Pastor would set the vision, of where you're going, of what's the most important thing in the church. And the job of the associate or assistant or the youth pastor is to carry out that vision in the ministry for the pastor.

I got to a point where I felt like God was telling me, "here's what I want you to do with the church, what I want you to carry out. Here's your vision." And I'm not saying that it didn't match up with the pastor's, but sometimes it felt like I was carrying out somebody else's job and not my own—what God has told me to do. So, I felt like I should be a lead pastor somewhere. God was telling me that.

But, I also wrestle with, like, the established church and their routines. I call it religiosity. That their 'religion' that they do, I wrestle with that. It's not the most important thing that you drink coffee every morning. It's not the most important thing what color the carpet is. Like, I didn't really want to fight those battles, and so in order to not fight those battles, you have to start a church. Start afresh, so you don't bring in any of those old traditions.

And so, knowing that's my personality, I felt God kind of said, "you're a church planter."

So then, from there, you just go, "okay, how are we going to raise the money? How are we going to support my family?" I have three kids. I'm, you know, fairly old for church planting. Most church planters are probably going to be in their late 20s, early 30s. I was closer to 40. So, wrestling with that.

Once I got it figured out that we can do this, and we can support our family, it's just a matter of jumping (laughs). It's like sky diving. You have to, one day, jump out of the plane. And so we did. And moved here not knowing anybody, but knowing that God had called us here. So knowing that it was going to be God's will.

And before we actually got to town, my assistant, which is Dustin—his name is Dustin Dugan. And him and his wife were both in my youth group when I was in Wichita as a youth pastor. Knowing that he wanted to be in the ministry, I called him up, said, "hey this is what I'm going to do." Really, with no hesitation, he said, "we're in." So I kind of knew that I was going to at least have one couple moving here with us, and we would be a team. So, that was almost a confirmation.

And all through the line, there was God's confirmation. We sold our house in a month in an area where there were houses that had been for sale for years. You know, we sold our house in a month.

My son broke his arm the day before we actually left to come to Kansas, actually two days. Driving here—this is a cool story—driving here, he still didn't have a cast, because it wasn't ready to be casted yet. So we were moving to a place where we had no idea where we would find a doctor or how we would pay for it. We stopped in a place called Champaign, Illinois—we

had friends there—just to spend the night. So my wife and I were like, “we just need to get this casted today, because it’s been like three days.

Showed up at a hospital, this guy walks by, you know... and long story short, a doctor comes and casts it, and we walk out of the hospital without paying a dime. We didn’t even register. I mean, nothing even happened. So, like, there were confirmations all along the way. To me, it was like a miracle that God had sent a doctor. Might not even be a doctor. Might have been an angel or whatever. We don’t know.

But, like, there was just a lot of those confirmations. We got a house, you know. How do we buy a house when we don’t even have a job? That kind of stuff. So.

I don’t know. When you’re in God’s will, you know it’s God’s will, confirmations happen. I think people throw out the word ‘God’s will’ or the phrase ‘God’s will’ a lot to justify their own actions, but if there’s no confirmations to connect you to God’s will, then how can you say it’s God’s will? But for us, it was just like ching, ching, ching. So I would say that’s, you know, pretty much that God wants us to be in Lawrence. When you put your house up and you’re like, “okay, how is this going to ever sell?” And it sells just like that. Then you’re like, “okay God knows what he’s doing. That’s cool.”

Yeah. So then, you were talking about how you kind of felt like you were working with someone else’s vision with the previous church that you were at. So then in terms of figuring out what Relevate would look like... you had talked a little bit about kind of breaking the religiosity, changing up some of those traditions. What else did you picture for Relevate to be like and what was your vision for what Relevate would be?

Um, I always think that church should be... I’ve been using this illustration a lot with people: it’s like an airport. I think a church should be like an airport. An airport is a really exciting place. When you get there, you go there and there’s people coming and going and there’s shops... but if you get your plane canceled, and you get stuck in an airport for a day or two, it starts to suck, right? Like, you get stuck there and there’s no movement. I think sometimes a church becomes... it should be the airport, which is the sending out of people to go to their ministry, to where they feel like God has called them. And so the church is the training ground or the sending ground is more accurate than the place with their ministry.

I feel like—you know, I’m not, this is nothing against the established church—but, you know, it decades before, maybe years ago, maybe even some churches are doing it now. But they feel like the center of ministry is the church. So the only time that people serve, or do something of God’s sending is through a church. Whether it be a Sunday school class or whether it be whatever. And people get stuck there. Because, really, what God has called us to do is “go.” The great commission is to go. So, I believe it’s the church’s job to send them out and to train them. So, when we’re serving, the exciting part is the church, okay Relevate can be the airport. That’s exciting and we’re going. But I’m trying to get them on their plane to go to their neighborhood, to go to their coworkers.

And so, in general, when I was establishing the church, everything was going to be about outward, training them to go outward. So, I felt like in an established church it would be hard to break those habits. Because maybe they’ve been taught that church is the most important thing. Their job as a Sunday school teacher. You know, and they’ve been teaching that class for 20 years, and that’s their ministry. Who am I to go and say, “that’s not really your ministry.

Your ministry is to your neighbors or to your coworkers. This is your training ground for you to do that.”

So does that make sense to you?

Yeah, it does.

So when I was establishing the church, I was—and maybe we can talk about this later—but Relevate, and how I came upon that name... the definition is a verb. Or, the verb version of ‘relevate’ means to restore. And that’s kind of what church is. It’s to pick people up. To raise them and restore them to go get on the plane and go, and feel like they have the ability to share with their fellow coworkers or whatever, family members, that they can have the ability to help them because of the grace of God in their lives. So, they’re carrying out the gospel themselves. I think that makes sense.

But ‘relevate’ is a term that I heard in camp when I was a youth pastor in Texas. A guy named Whit George—Whitney George—his church is in Tulsa. Anyway, I was at a youth conference. I think he read out of an old dictionary and said this word’s not even in the new dictionary.

Yeah.

So I was like... that word stuck with me. And, as we were naming, or trying to figure out a name for our church, that word popped back into my head and I was like... I love the version of that verb. And that’s how I got that. That’s what I wanted my church to be about.

It’s not about coming to a church and acting like you have it together, because you don’t, you know. But that’s what, a lot of times, we act like... we put our dress on, our suit on, and we act like we have it together, but we don’t. So, if we come to a church that’s already full of broken people, we can help each other, where everyone is.

Does that answer your question?

Yeah. Um, so then kind of switching gears to the more logistical side... so once you’re moving out here, what went into the planning and actually making Relevate happen as an organization? What steps did you take?

Uh, we’re still in the process of probably some of those steps. I haven’t incorporated yet, um, on purpose. When we’re established, I have a... I don’t have a 501-c-3, but I’m connected with a 501-c-3, so some of those steps I’m taking are really slow because I don’t want it to be so organizationally driven. More organic, if that makes sense. Organic with the leadership in play.

I mean, most of all, the thing for us was establishing support: “is that even possible for us moving out here?” After that, you kind of have to come with your structure—what you want your church... so for us it was website. So we got a website. That was probably the first thing I bought for the church was a website so that we can inform the people, you know, “this is who we are.” And maybe a location, if possible. We’re, you know, limited funds.

I would say from the beginning, I had to have a support group. And I don’t know if you want to get into this, but there’s a lot of church planting support groups out there now that fund people. So, I’m a part of an organization called LAUNCH, which is a big one out of Atlanta. So, I got

connected with them. I had to go through an assessment, and I had to approve of me, that I had the abilities and the gifts and things to be a lead pastor. Um, and then after that, you get support. So, with LAUNCH, I went through LAUNCH assessment in June of 2011? So, June 2011 we went to Vegas to get approved. Funny that the assessment was in Vegas, but we were in Vegas. And, I got approved there. And they gave us, through a year, \$15,000 to help us get started. And I used that \$15,000 to help with the church. So we bought all of our sound equipment, our stage, you know, the things that logistically we needed to run church. So that's where that funding came from, to be able to invest in and actually get started as a church.

And then I went through another organization called Converge Heartland, which is basically... I think they're headquartered out in South Dakota, but they fund me some salary which is not enough, but it's some salary. So I had those things. I had raised some support through people in the church. My home church, the church in Pennsylvania that I came out of, and then Converge was helping us get here with the pay.

Anyway, so I had two elements coming together. One was going to help fund the church, and the other was going to help fund our family. So, when I got those together, I was feeling, "okay, this is falling into place." I had to go through two assessments, which was a pain, because we were...my wife and I, but they're not that big of a deal. I've been in ministry long enough, I think I can figure it out. So, when those two things came together, I felt like we were kind of on our way then. And then, kind of, the next steps happened, and finding a location and... we were playing basketball and racquetball at Holcom and we thought, "hey, we can just meet here." So that kind of just fell into place.

Yeah. So I just learned about the assessment project over the course of this project over the summer. It was a new world to me. So tell me a little bit about both of the groups that you were doing assessment with. What was required of you, and how did they set it up?

Assessment would be... well, LAUNCH is a little different than Converge. I mean each of them have their own system and they take pride in their system, Converge probably a little bit more than others. With Converge you feel a little bit more like a rat in a trap, you know, they're standing there... or, laboratory mice might be better. But they just try to figure out your personality. Giftings, you know, if you're a leadership type person. If you're a take charge kind of person. Because you get people in there a lot... there's the rush of starting a church, or, you know, there's a lot of people that want to do that and not necessarily considering the cost of what it takes. And if you're not good... if your personality's not good at gathering people in the first place, what makes you think you can go into a church plant and actually gather people? So there are basically just trying to get that out there.

And also marriage. If your marriage is strong enough, because the planting process is really hard on your family. I mean, really hard on it. So they want to see if your marriage is strong enough to go through it. So, you go through some marriage counseling, you go see a marriage counselor. There's usually some kind of a guy seeing what's in your head, what's in your past, what needs to come out.

And then a lot of the else is like financial, you know, can you pay... do you know how much it is going to cost? Basically, they're just setting you up in situations to figure out if you can figure out to do it.

Right.

With Converge assessment, there was more role play. Like, they were trying to figure out who's the leader, but you know, there's probably eight couples in that assessment and they put together and they give us a role play in which I figure out... they're standing back and watching to figure out who's the leader in the situation, who's going to take charge. So like, you're the pastor, and you have to figure out what the name of your church will be and blah blah blah. So, basically have to present to them at the end a church plant and your vision and goals. And starting that day together as a team, you gotta figure out who's going to do all that stuff. So that's kind of fun.

But we... you know, not everybody... with the LAUNCH organization, if you had 10 couples, about 4 of them passed. Converge is probably a little higher, because they have a little push for numbers. Like, they want to plant so many churches. So I think they're a little easier to pass than LAUNCH. LAUNCH is more... But, they also try to... which, we might not have passed now, because they try to connect you to your church that is sending you, so they're more... LAUNCH is more concerned about your home church that's sending you out, and we don't necessarily have that.

Yeah.

Which that's... we can talk about that later, too. That's the hardest thing right now is that I don't have a central church to go to and say, "Hey, we need this." I don't have any of that.

Right. Yeah. So what do you do... in terms of, you had a little bit of support from both LAUNCH and Converge, but and I know that you're bivocational right now too, with being both the pastor or Relevelate while working on the side, so how... what have you done in terms of your own gaining financial support as well.

Well we... a lot of our church from Pennsylvania, a lot of people helped us out there. My dad's a pastor in Topeka, so some people in his church have helped us out.

You know the home church... the church that we came out of recently gave us \$1,000 for a year to help us pay for our house, so that was help for a whole year. They split, their church, so they couldn't afford to keep paying us. So that dropped after a year.

Man, the spiritual answer is that God provides every time. My wife and I always say that. The bills always get paid. We don't have to go without. The kids. That was a big thing for me. I don't want them to have to go without. Not necessarily spoiled, but I don't want them to feel church planting in a hard kind of way, you know, like "we never did this, we never did this growing up. My dad didn't have money." I didn't want that. So, we've never felt that. God has really always taken care of us.

You know, we're running a small church, but I do work full time. Even with my full time gig though I can still... I mean, they're open with me about doing things. So I don't know, I mean, God has worked it out. We had some really generous people at the beginning. I also went to a few churches, so I have probably four churches that support us at \$100 a month, even to this day. Like, three of them still support us at \$100 a month. I have a really close friend in Florida. They support us monthly. They give \$100 a month. So. We get these checks, it's about \$600 a month. And we have the Converge money still.

The process that we're in now, is when the church is going to start paying us. And I want them to, you know, get the privilege of paying a pastor because I think that is... something of a, "hey! We're actually supporting our pastor now." So, it's a little bit of something they should look forward to. So.

But yeah. I don't know. The easy answer is God provides. I know God takes care of... I don't do the bills because I think that's a struggle for me, a worry as the provider of the family. Like, "ugh!" My wife has never said that we're getting close or anything, so I mean, we've always done good. So.

So then, outside of the financial support, in terms of human support—because starting a church is something that you clearly can't have just completely on your shoulders... I know you had your assistant that was coming on—but what other things did you do for getting other people in and helping out? And just—

--what do you mean, like in a logistical sense? In actually doing church? Or actually...

--Yeah, like the logistical side of getting people to be a part of it.

Yeah, I'm not a big stand up on and preach about needing people to help... I think that's something that's a God-given call and they should want to. So yeah. We need more people in some of that stuff, like setting up. We have to get up there at 8am to set up. And Dustin and I, we have a music guy that I pay a little bit, um, that I met through Craigslist and he's there every Sunday. So we set it up, and usually a couple of other people straggle in and help us. Break down is easy, because everyone really stays and helps out.

But uh... I have a Kids Director. I feel really good about her. She's really creative. I believe she's God-sent. The music guy that I got from Craigslist is doing really well. I have a full band. I mean, for many churches that are small, this is usually the hardest part, but we've really been blessed with really good music. And, he's a very techy guy, so our website's very graphically driven. If you've checked our website out, it's usually pretty good with the graphics. Sometimes I have to remind him to change them out a little bit, but I have noticed that God just kind of put things in their place to make it happen.

We have, you know, these big huge boxes, if you've seen a church plant. I don't know if you've seen much of them, but they make customized boxes. Church in a Box is a great organization. But, before we got started, Legacy in Kansas City, which is a church developing a multi-site church... three or four... you know what a multi-site is right?

Yep.

Alright. So they have like three or four campuses. And they just gave us, like eight boxes. Travel boxes. And those are like \$800 a piece. So they just gave 'em to us because they were done using them. So...

That's pretty helpful!

Oh yeah! I couldn't afford all that!

(laughs)

So that's helped.

Someone gave us all their graphics when they first started. Like, all the banners. It was donated from Harvest Graphics in Kansas City. I don't know. Like I said, God just keeps, you know, he donates stuff to you.

I have this huge 'ol bounce house that I use for ministries, like we do a birthday party. I don't know if you saw that?

Yeah, I did see that.

So, we give that for free, because God gave it to me for free, so. I don't know. We just. Logistically how it happens is people that are committed to the commission show up on Sunday morning and we get it done. And then we try to reach new people when they come in. When more people started coming to our church, we'd try to get them involved in some form of ministry. But again, I mean, like I said. I don't want them to be stuck in the church ministry role, not realizing that this is a training ground that is sending you out.

So, I mean, I have lots of nursery workers. My kid has been really good. He's a 15 year old kid. Never had the chance to work with little kids at... in the established churches he was always in the ministry, meaning, he was the one being taught. So with our church plant, we don't really have a youth group yet. That's coming. So he's like one of my nursery workers there at 15. And you know, he loves kids. And who would have known that? You know, we never would have found that out at the established church. Everybody just pitches in, you know.

My family. If you come see us at Relevate, you know, at 9 in the morning, you'll see my family setting up church. It just happens. But. Which, I don't think that's a bad thing. I mean, I don't... they'll, as it grows, they'll feel like, "man, we had a part in that." So, that's exciting.

Yeah. Um, I wanted to follow up to a little bit earlier. You said there were some challenges about not being a part of an established church that you're launching out of. Can you talk to me about what some of those challenges are?

Yeah. Like, if you come out of a church, my buddy, like he would have some of these parts—these guys in LAUNCH. But they send out from a big, huge church of like 5,000 people. For 5,000 people, they'll send on mission for a year, 50 – 100 people to go with you to help you get established.

EastLake was a little like that. They didn't have as many as 50 – 100, but they sent out those people from EastLake, and moved out here for a year. There are certain churches that would do it like that. I mean at EastLake, they're meeting on the west side of town, there's no "East Lake" here, so they took their graphics, they took everything with them.

I have none of that. So everything that we have is established and created, which is fine. We like that. But there's no home base to go back and say, "Hey! We're going to do this block party summer outreach. Can you send us a missions team to help us run this? Or can you send us money to help us pay for it?"

Um, I have LAUNCH, but once they give you your money, they kind of... they want to train you, because I've been through training with them, but I don't know, to have a home base, I think you always have a... I think for me, it's not so much the 'things' or money, it would be more support. Like, personally. Like "hey, I'm with you. I'm praying for you." Or somebody that calls me every now and then to say hey. You know, the pastor in Pennsylvania... I've never been called in two years. Not one phone call. And we left on good terms but, out of sight out of mind. It's not in his backyard, so he doesn't pay attention to it. And I think that, more than anything, you miss that.

My dad is old school. I guess you're taping this.... but, he's not really into the church planting world. So, he like wants to grow his church to 250 – 300 before he retires. So, I would like to see him give us 50 people to start off with so our 60 – 70 would now be over 100 and people would be like, "wow! This is really—"

So that's what I'm saying. Like, logistically you miss out on something. But I think the support... like, I can't go to my dad and say "hey, this is what we're struggling with." Because he doesn't see it.

Yeah.

He thinks he did the same thing when they split. He used to be a pastor at Eastside Baptist. They split. He took 75- 80 people with him and started a church. That's not a church plant. To me, that's splitting. So, there's a disconnect in people supporting us. And I think that that's probably the hardest part for me is that there's not a lot of "hey I'm with you, I'm prayin' for ya. What do you need?"

Yeah.

The churches that send us money send us money. But I don't hear from them. So. And it's a two-way street. I get that, like I can call them, too. But, my time is limited. If I'm making family first, as you're supposed to as a pastor—put them first, and then your church—but, then you gotta work for 40 hours, and so. Anyway, yeah. That's what I would say is the logistical problem of not having a home base is support, personally.

Yeah. Have you gotten a chance—or, have you been able to get any just partnerships with other pastors or leaders in the area that are like-minded that you could spend time with? Or...

Matt Cox and I, I mean, we have met once. I know they get together—him and Deacon—sometimes. I mean, it's loose. It's not... I don't usually go because it doesn't fit my work schedule. So no? (laughs).

The Converge guy is probably the biggest supporter, because, I mean, in terms of contact, I met with him yesterday. He was in town. So he knows. Yeah. He keeps in contact with me. I have my old youth pastor... he's in Atlanta. He calls probably once a month. So, there are people checking on me, I just, I'm looking into getting into a group in Kansas City. There's a big church planting group in Kansas City, like a huge one. Probably 80 church planters get together. And so, probably will start going there if it's... if I can get it in. So.

I mean, I'm not worrying. I'm a veteran in ministry, so it's not like I, you know, don't know what to do next!

(laughs)

But friendships are big. Like, I have another friend over in Independence that we get together sometimes. But I'm just saying, feeling like we're a part of this or taking responsibility like, I can't go back. Even after five years I wouldn't look back and say, "hey, this church helped us start." There's not one, you know. These people helped *me*, helped support *me*, so yeah, I can say that they played a little role. But taking a huge... because I think that's what churches should be about. And this is just me. That's why I want to plant another church. Because I think it's a reproducing movement. Like, if you get stuck in one movement, then you're stuck in the airport. So, as a church, if we're going to demonstrate that, that means we're going to plant more. It's a reproducing moment. Why wouldn't you want more people to experience that? And eventually go somewhere else.

And I think a lot of churches get to that. But the ones I'm surrounded by? Not so much. So, I don't know if that makes sense.

Yeah.

Yeah. So then when Relevate launched, how did you set that up? Did you kind of ease into services and start with, like, one service every two weeks, or did you have an official launch date?

Yeah, we did. Official launch date. We put that out on our t-shirts. We did like three preview services. One was a train wreck. Two of them weren't too bad. But yeah. We did an Easter egg hunt at Holcomb. We had an Easter bunny and the bounce house and stuff. Handed out invitations and tried to get people to come. Because we launched... we actually launched on Easter. So we had the Easter egg hunt a couple weeks before. And, yeah, the launch was pretty good. I think we had about 75 people. For a launch, that's not too bad. Some of them family members of mine and Dustin and from my wife and parents and... but yeah. So we kind of launched.

And I don't know if I would have done it differently, or, maybe? I don't know, I think it's tough to go straight into a launch. I mean in your next Sunday, you go from 75 down to 50 down to 30. Ended up at 25 and then trying to build it back up, so.

The hardest part about church planting in the parachute church plant would be... like, when people come to church for the first time, they want to hide. They don't want people to surround them. They don't, since they don't know anybody, it's uncomfortable for people to talk to people. And so they try to roll into the back. And you can't do that in a church plant. Like, you're going to be found. We know who everybody is! And we want to know you, because you might be a part of us. So, you kind of have to tell your people to ease into it. You know, let 'em come get a cup of coffee.

You know, our church is late arriving, because that's how this world is. So we actually start at 10:10am. But I don't tell anybody that because if they knew that it's at 10:10, then they'd show up at 10:15 and...

(laughs)

So, I tell them 10 and they show up at around 10:02, 10:03. So we're still having that time of hanging out, so. A guest would just want to come in and hide in the back instead of having that uncomfortable time of drinking coffee. So, um.... that's hard.

So if you had a group of people our age that would help them, you know. It is what it is.

Kind of. It's working.

Yeah. How did you, quote-unquote, market for launch and get word out there that Relevate was starting up? What sorts of things did you do?

Yeah. Well... a lot of facebook. And, send out, you know the facebook invites. We also bulk-mailed. Not the whole city, that's—

Really expensive, yeah.

Really expensive. Matt (Cox) does that like twice a year. But they have a big church. When you even bulk mail now, like every door direct, you can pick the neighborhood that you want to send to. So I think we did that. We picked the neighborhoods that we wanted to send to. And then we had the Easter egg hunt, which was kind of... we had, you know, shirts that had our date: 4/8/12. What our launch date was, so.

I mean the best marketing is obviously word of mouth. So, if we can get to the people, and then but... I know you're asking about launch, but launch was... we didn't have the people—

--no, you can talk about anything beyond launch, before launch, during! Anything!

I mean, marketing a non-stop—

--right

How you're going to market ourselves. And so, we've done anything from giving a couch away. Like, last Easter we did, "If your Couch Could Talk" because I work with furniture, at Discovery Furniture. So, they enabled us to purchase a couch for \$100. So I got five couches. You know, if you came for the first time, you got your name in a hat to get a couch. So we were giving couches away and... um, like it fit our series. We weren't just, "hey!" you know, bribing people.

(laughs)

...you know I'm not above that! (laughs). But, you know we just do fun things in marketing. I try to think outside the box, because I don't have the money to bulk-mail. So, we put our trailer up. We have a trailer and I usually park it outside somewhere, like a restaurant, so people can see it. We volunteer our bounce house anywhere, you know. So like the Dad's Days in the Park, we had our bounce house out there with our big flags. Relay for Life had our bounce house. We went out there for that.

It's really had to market because you don't have a building. So, if people can't see your location, they have a hard time going. "What are you?" You might hear "Relevate," and that's not a typical church name so, they don't really know what it is.

So yeah, I mean, that's the process that we're still trying to think through. And how do we get better at it? I mean... I don't have a good answer for that. I think our website is important, but if nobody knows what your website address is, where it's at, nobody's going to it.

So, I know facebook helps a lot. So I try to get our people to share the statuses of Relevate. Try to get people, because... like when I was trying to give a couch away, like, 2,000 people looked at it, just because it was crazy. You know, it was something different. They wanted to know what was going on. So we linked it to our YouTube, our viral video that we did.

I think marketing's all about buzz and trying to get... trying to get yourself noticed. But that's hard. Because the gospel's about the Lord Jesus, not yourself and not your church. But about Jesus loving people. But they gotta come to the church first before they meet Jesus. So it's always a hard, a hard thing to do.

I don't know if I have a good plan for it yet, but we do try to do things that are outside of the box. Like the block party we're doing in August. August 24th we're doing a—we're not going to do a Sunday church—but we're doing a block party outside Holcomb and we're bringing in a DJ and, you know, big inflatables and free hot dogs and chips. Just trying to make ourselves, you know, Jesus to the neighborhood. Trying to figure out how to show them that we care and that we're here and that we do a lot of that stuff.

We had the Easter egg hunt. We had Breakfast with Santa, made pancakes and took pictures with Santa. You might have seen pictures of that on our website.

Yeah.

We had 250 people show up for that, so that was pretty good. So those have always done really well for us, but I haven't seen a lot of those people come back. But they know we're there, and I think that's the important thing at this point, in the starting stages.

So, I don't have a good marketing strategy. But, I think we've done really well for not spending a lot of money. I don't think that sending flyers out to every house is the way to go either. It's not... it's not stewardship. The aspect is not very smart. ...for us. (laughs).

I'd rather get paid every now and then than send out—

(laughs)

--a bulk flyer to people who just throw those in the trash. EastLake does pretty well with that because they have a lot of money, I think. I haven't seen a whole lot of marketing from the other churches, just because it is hard.

You know, Vintage did—not Vintage, but Velocity—did signs. Yard signs. They were green and you can hardly see them. I saw those. I mean... you spend a lot of money and then it doesn't work. That's the problem with church planting. Like, was that a good idea? I always think. Like, you can guess yourself. I don't know.

Because every time I bulk-mail I'm like, "is that a good idea?" But then you see somebody come and you're like, "how'd you find out about us?"

"Oh, I got a flyer in the mail."

“Oh, okay! It works.” So. So that’s happened. ”

Yeah, I don’t know. I remember seeing a lot of the Velocity signs because when I first moved here, it was right when they had put the signs out. And I was like, “what is Velocity?? I’m seeing these signs everywhere.” So, like, that one actually really stuck with my mind. So when I got started on this project, Velocity was one of the first churches that I thought of.

Well, there you go.

(laughs) So, it’s funny what works and what doesn’t. I guess it depends on the person.

Yeah, and I mean then... how do you keep it going? How do you sustain that? That’s the hard point. If you’re going to do yard signs are you going to do it all the time? Or are you just going to do it sometimes? When do you decide? And what do you do with all these yard signs now that nobody’s using them? That’s hard. So. We’ve thought about that. For the block party we’re going to do yard signs. You know, just in our neighborhood. Just say, “Block Party.”

I think that you gotta be more intent. That’s what we’re trying to do, to be more intent. So instead of, “hey, we’re going to reach out to everybody!” it’s “let’s try to reach the community that we’re in.” And we’re probably more a 30s church, so, we’re not... hip college kids come, but I’m not going to focus on the college. There’s enough churches doing that. But Lawrence has a lot of people in their 30s with young kids that aren’t going to church. A big... big number.

So you know, we could be that with my age group. Got a lot of people coming from that. So.

Sweet. So then a little bit earlier you mentioned that a lot of the people that are coming to Relevate are people that don’t have backgrounds in the church. Can you talk to me a little bit about that?

Mhm. Some people came because of the Breakfast with Santa. I have a couple that came because of our Breakfast with Santa and didn’t even know it was a church. They just came for the pancakes. They haven’t missed, really, too many weeks since. They have a Catholic background a little bit, but, you know our church is so different, I don’t... I think if the Catholic Church were the Catholic Church then our church is totally different. So if you come to ours, from a Catholic background, and you know, on Mass time—and I’m not talking ‘every Sunday Catholics’, I’m saying sometimes they go. To our church? Then I consider that... you don’t really have a church background as far as the way I feel about it. Because they don’t ... okay.

So I’d say them. They came because of that. Some was because of my daughter. Her best friend started coming with her parents. Because of Shayla. Guy came because he had a card, but hadn’t really been to church. A friend of mine that I went to high school with and had been out of church for like six years, just randomly ran into. He started coming. And it’s that kind of stuff.

So you’re getting people who.... That was my goal. I didn’t want to start a church—because a lot of church planters will start a church and they’ll get a group of people that are unhappy with their church and it’s like they’re just transplanting growth. It’s not growing anybody. So I didn’t really want to start a church for that reason. So I asked God to give me people that haven’t

been in church or have never been in church or are unhappy with the church. So. That's what I get.

The downside of that is you have to teach them how to give and what it's about and support because they're not used to that. "Giving? What?!" Because they've been told that all the church does is ask for money. So it's just a different mindset.

What I try to do is lead out of my example, you know. I believe in generosity. Tithing is the law, but generosity is the New Testament version. So, I want us to be above and beyond what the law said. So, trying to teach generosity in my own life, you know, like with the bounce house. We give it out to anybody. And I keep saying that I like being an emphasis in that kind of stuff. Be willing to give with what God has given you. So, it's worked.

You know, I think our church is just slowly getting to the point of, "okay, I understand giving." But there are drawbacks in doing that. But anyway, I think that's the exciting place. I think that's where God has been gifted me in... in working with the non-church. Like, I've really struggled with the granny that's been in the church forever and not willing to do anything, but complain about everything. So, I don't do well with that.

(laughs)

So, I mean, like... because I don't think that's what God had in mind for the church. (sarcastically) Like "this is *your* church so *you* shouldn't get involved in it." No! We're all the same. So, I think that's why church planting works for me. Instead of taking, like, my old-bodied church in Wichita. They'd take... I used to work for a church in Wichita. They called me. But so... those are such established churches full of... Frankly, both of them are dying.

So did I want to put my kids in a... revive the dead? Or start a, you know... Give birth? Or revive the dead? Give birth is a lot... to me, makes a lot more sense, because revive the dead, if they're dead, you should stop it. Might as well try something else, you know? Because there's a lot of churches that are just life support, you know? They probably should go away because they're not necessarily—and this is my opinion. Like, start fresh and do something new. Giving new life to everybody, instead of just tradition. So.

So I'm interested in hearing a little bit about what your days look like. So you're in just a little bit over the first year of starting Relevate here, and you're working two jobs... what's on your plate?

I have three jobs. I sub too.

Oh no!

(laughs) But school's not in session, so I'm not right now. I thought it was really important to be inside the school system, so.

Oh, what do my days look like.... mmmm... Well, on Mondays and Tuesdays, I have the day off. So I spend it mostly with my wife and family. And during the school year, I'll either sub Monday or Tuesday. So I'll only take one day off. Because in the summer, I've been taking Monday and Tuesday off and spending it with my kids. I try not to do a lot of church work. I mean, obviously

you have to do some outline form. Try to get my message, a little bit, started. But most of those days are set aside for family.

Wednesday I start work and I work Wednesday through Sunday. So Wednesday, Dustin and I meet here. I have to be at work at 9:30, so I mostly have my message kind of set. We don't write it, we just say where we want to go. I tell him the things I need for Sunday and then we send an email out, but I usually write the email from work. We send it, a mail chip email out.

Thursday I'm workin' 10:00 to 8:00 at night, so there's not a whole lot of church work going on there.

No.

I do try to make contact with people during, while I'm working. Because it isn't, Discovery Furniture's not always busy. So, they let us carry our ipads around, so I send out some emails. I do that.

Tuesday nights we have a basketball league that we play in. So I'm with the guys then.

Friday night is with my family again. Saturday I work until 7, and usually I'm home after that, for the evening with my family. And then I go downstairs to write. So, finish up my message and make sure I have it.

I get up pretty early on Sunday, about six in the morning to make sure, do the final touches, making sure it has all the scriptures I'm going to use. Go to church at 8, set up. Church is at 10. Go out to lunch with people after break down, be at work at 1. So. I'm off by 5 so.

I don't know. It works at this point.

What's getting left out is spending a lot more time developing people, because there's just not a lot of leftover time to develop people.

Yeah.

So, I'm a major family guy. And I believe that if you lose your family, you're done with the ministry anyways. So I really try to... like, I've got a 15 year old kid. A boy. The only one I really do any discipling with is him. So, I really take it seriously.

I don't know. Does that give you a good enough picture?

Yeah!

But you're working on church stuff through all that. Like I said, my work isn't... God has blessed me with that job because I have the ability to still do church work while I'm still paying attention to notice a customer coming in. So.

Yeah.

It's not like I have to be... I don't know, like, 100% of the time at that place, which is good. So.

And subbing I think is really... Subbing is easy. Like, because you can get there at 7:30 or 8 or whenever they want you to start and you're done by 2:30 or 3, so. After that you can work on more church stuff. But, I try to do at least 20 hours a week for church, but that's probably all I got right about now.

If I say, like, "you're going to pay me \$200 a week," eventually... probably in the next month. Twenty hours for \$200 is not too bad of a deal. So like, I'm trying to justify how much I'm doing. And like I say, I'd like to do 40 hours a week of church work because that would enable us to have a good marketing strategy, we would be able to have a good, you know, follow up strategy. This isn't, you know, where we're going. And I still haven't... as a church planter, and I'm sure you've been talking to all these guys, we don't really stop thinking about it. We just kind of turn it off for a little bit or put it on pause. That's kind of how... that's a better illustration. I put stuff on pause so I can take care of other things, you know.

I've been trying to plan a vacation because I haven't had a Sunday off, like, ever. So, like that's healthy. I need to take care of myself emotionally.

Yeah.

But yeah. It's a full day.

So. But yeah. That's what you do.

I'm not overworked, for sure. (laughs). None of my jobs are... you know, people go out and do construction and work their butts off for 40 hours and gotta stop. Discovery Furniture is not that! (laughs)

(laughs) And then, since I haven't gotten a chance to go to Relevate and probably won't because this weekend I'm gone and the next weekend, I'm moving to Indiana. So--

--Right.

But tell me a little bit about what your services would look like if I were to go. What would it be like?

Uh, 10:00 people roll in the door. Maybe. Um, then we have the donuts and the coffee for free. We have the Relevate huge banner that was donated. It's really cool looking. And we have the flags outside. We usually try to have a greeter at the door. That's Dustin's wife. She has a baby though, so sometimes she's not always there. So I'm always there by the door. You would be greeted. And everybody that's wrote on a card in our church says it's really friendly. Everyone smiles. A very comfortable place.

It's casual. You know, I preach in shorts sometimes. Sometimes, this being not a dress-up place.

We're in a series called "Summer of Love." We do a countdown clock, so everybody knows it's time. You'd hear Austin Powers music, you know...

(laughs)

...with the '70s looking theme. So, that's kind of a sign for people to go in. Um, the music starts. David, my leader, they usually do a song, a welcome, and then there's two more songs. Then we do the intro video do the message. I preach for about 25 minutes. I try to keep it right there. Then we do announcements at the end. Then they do one more song and we're done.

So, services last 50 minutes, 55 if I preach a little long. But. It's about all people can really listen for. So. But it's a pretty good in-and-out service. I think we're pretty good at that.

We're pretty creative through our messages. Probably, we'd want to be way more creative. But knowing what kind of a size of our church... we can't overwhelm them. Plus we have to pack up all that stuff. So. I would like to do more, you know. We talked about "love your neighbor as yourself" this week, so obviously the key in that is "as yourself." If you don't love yourself, you're going to have a hard time loving people. So we're trying to have a spa day. Our dream would be like, doing spas and pedicures while the service was going. We thought that would be awesome. But then we realized, "we're kind of small...that could be really awkward."

(laughs)

And so, like if it was a big church, you could do that for some people and it wouldn't really... it would be kind of funny, but so, you have to adjust some of the things that you kind of think through. Because Dustin's good at leading it. I'm kind of creative minded, so I would think, "hey! We could do this, we could do that." But... eventually that's what our church will probably be? A church that does kind of weird things, and crazy things.

We don't have the rock show like EastLake. I like that. But, that's probably not ever going to be us. You know, I don't think it's built on a show, but I think it's part of the service that people have to enjoy and be proud of to show their friends. So, I think that they would be? And I spend enough time on the message, but my style is... listen to the styles that are trying to be practical. Like, "this is what applies to you today." This is not really... I don't do heady. Because I want them to have the walk and like, I always try to give them one point. I don't preach 18 points. Just one point. "This is what I want you to know. When you walk out of here, this is what I want you to think about."

So, that's kind of our service. And at the end we break down. We usually try to invite everybody to go out to eat with us and be in this community. Not everybody can go, but usually three or four families are at Carlos O'Kelly's after church.

We do R-Groups during the week, which is our small group ministry. We do it on Tuesdays. We haven't been doing it in Summer anymore, because basketball league is still going. But after that's over, we'll go back to doing it at either Dustin's house or my house. We used to have two, and we'll get back to two this fall, so that we have two groups that meet. They usually talk kind of what the message was about. I don't usually write it out and say, "you guys have to discuss these questions," but you know, more of an informal, "how does this apply?" Like, "are you living that out?" We usually have food. Hang out with the kids... because, we're trying to get the people to realize that church isn't just a one time, show up and see these people, but relying on these people. Like, we are your family. So, which is a lot easier in a church plant than an established church.

I think people feel it a little bit. So.

Good. Well hey, I don't want to take too much more of your morning. Um, but are there any other things that are a part of the Relevate story that I haven't asked about yet, or other things that I should know?

The Relevate story. I don't know, I think the cool thing is that God brought me back to Kansas to reach some of the people that I even went to high school with. So I've got like three people that I went to high school with that have now started. Like, I went to Shawnee Heights in Topeka. Some of the people that were reaching live in Tecumseh. So, like, I went to high school with them. I mean, they were kind of in church, but not really? Like, they were hit and miss, but now they're becoming a vital part of a church plant and helping us reach a city.

So I think basically my... if I look back at Relevate, it's kind of like a guy is coming back to his hometown, which it's not my hometown. Topeka's my hometown. But, coming back to my home state. And reaching people that I kind of grew up with. And that's kind of my desire still, like, there's still more people that I would like to see that I... you know, that I went to high school with and aren't really in church, not really following. And I'd like to see us bring them back and kind of realize how God has given us relationships in the past for future reference. And I think that's kind of, that's the story that I'm kind of seeing played out... along with other people.

I don't know. I think it's a crazy, crazy thing this church plant. Especially parachuting, so. It's almost stupid. Um.... but God take's care of you. That's the cool thing. Like, there's no reason we got a house. There's no reason we're paying our bills. Because we're not taking a penny from Relevate. Now it's been a year into it. So like the preoccupation that God... I feel my calling in life is not paying us yet. But God is still, still takes care of us. So I mean it's just, it's totally God's story. Why it happened, I don't know.

God has a huge plan for Relevate. It's just sometimes that you want it to happen faster than maybe God wants it to. But, I think we're in a steady climb? I know like... where EastLake probably experienced a lot of growth really fast, I think we're experiencing growth, but it's a steady hill climb. I don't know if that's the experience of Vintage, I don't know, or Velocity. I don't know what they would say. But for us, I think I can see us growing. But also, it might take three years for us to reach, you know, 200 people. I don't know, so.

I don't know what else you would know about Relevate, but.

Raise and restore people. That's kind of what we want to do. That's our main mission.

And I think that's important for any kind of church plant. Even a church. Stick to your mission statement. Stick with what you're supposed to do.

I read a book called *Church Unique* by Will Mancini. Very, very good reference material about church pl--... any kind of church. Basically it's saying that... his point was that every church does something unique. You know, God has planted each church plant for a unique reason. And as long as you're in that unique reason, as long as you're focusing on that, then that's what God has you for. If you do kid's ministry, do it really well. If you do music, do it really well. Because that's what sets you apart from every other church. And so, we're still trying to find...

I think in every church plant you have to find what you're unique at, but you also have to go, "this is how I'm gifted." So, "this is why I'm going to take the church. This is..." Because I feel like, you know, as the pastor, as the vision-setter, like, God has gifted me for this and this is how I ... you know, that's why we do birthday parties for kids that can't afford it, because that's kind

of my mission. You know, reach the family, reach the family and help people. So, that's what we're going to be unique in, is kids ministry.

But I think Relevate—as long as we stick to our uniqueness—that's the big plan. And you can give us value. You know, I want the community to go, “that church adds value to Lawrence.” Like, if we close down 10 years from now, I want them to go “man, that Relevate Church. Where are they at? We need them.” You know? That's what I would like to get to. We're not there yet. But I would like for us to get to that point. So that might take a little while, but.

You know?

Yeah, yeah.

The birthday parties are—because I don't know if I've explained that much. My wife works for Hallmark, so we get a lot of birthday party stuff. I have a bounce house. Our church provides the cake. So what we're trying to do is, is have a ministry... and I just found a non-profit that does the same thing. So it's not like... I'm not the only one. I thought I was the only one for a while, so I was researching, but there's a non-profit in North Carolina that does birthday parties for homeless kids. That's in Charlotte. So we're going to try and do birthday parties for kids that can't afford birthday parties. And just take our trailer out there. We have music and...

It hasn't really caught on yet, so I'm trying to figure out why. And I don't want to overwhelm our church either. So... it could be one of those things like, where everybody wants to do it. So, but we're still trying to think about that. But I think it's one of those unique things that we can do.

Yeah.

That not anybody around here, nobody else is doing it. So.

I mean, Lawrence is a community that cares. They do a lot of things for people. But, I don't know if it's connected to the right reason. They might—this is how I view it—to a church. So like, you're serving, at the airport, you're going out and you're serving, and I think that's what I'm trying to get our people to do. And so the birthday parties, in my mind, should come from your relationships that you are creating and so I would love for our church people to take that back and go, “hey Brandon, this guy over here needs a birthday party. I've been talking to his family about it.” That's how I want it. Instead of advertising it and putting it all over the paper, and just having random people call. I would like relationships out of people. Does that make sense?

Yeah.

So. That's what I'm trying to do. I think that's kind of a unique thing that Relevate will do.

Well.... I will call it at that then, or I'll take you all day.

You got enough?