

Matt Cox

Lead Pastor

EastLake Community Church; Lawrence, KS

Interviewed by Emily Stratton at the EastLake Office, Lawrence, KS

July 16, 2013 at 2:30pm

Transcribed by Emily Stratton

Abstract: EastLake Community Church is a non-denominational church-plant that was launched in Lawrence, Kansas in 2009. This interview features Matt Cox, the planter and lead pastor of EastLake. As EastLake recently produced a documentary video about its origins and history, questions in this interview do not repeat what has already been recorded. This video is available for viewing from the Religion in Kansas Project archives, and its transcription is also available there. It is recommended that the video or video transcript be viewed prior to reading this present interview transcript. Interview questions here are further follow-up questions, based upon the history as presented in the video. After hearing bit more background to Matt's personal history, interview questions focus primarily upon four topics: first, a breakdown of EastLake's funding and financial resources before launching in Lawrence; second, what was required of Matt in order to transition his career in video game programming into being a lead pastor and church planter; third, some of the challenges faced during EastLake's "desert period" in which securing a permanent location was a major difficulty; and fourth, some projections for EastLake's future, now that a permanent location has been secured.

Note: The audio file of this transcription will not be added to the Religion in Kansas Project archives. The name of an organization that has provided financial support for EastLake was mentioned in a few places during the interview, yet this organization has requested to remain anonymous. Splicing the audio file in a way that left the interview coherent to listeners proved to be difficult and choppy. Therefore, a slightly edited version of the transcription that protects the donor organization's anonymity has been archived instead. The name of the donor organization has been changed to Company-X, and persons whose names may weaken the anonymity have also been changed. Unrelated content has not been edited and remains transcribed word for word. Interview questions and comments by Emily have been written in **bold** type, and Matt's responses are written in regular type.

So anyways, Matt, I know you talked a little bit about some of your own personal background on the video, but if I could get a little bit more about where you grew up, kind of your story about how you got connected into ministries altogether that would be an awesome intro.

Sure. My mom remarried and moved when I was around six. She remarried my stepfather, Bill, and she moved from DC. And I... almost all my family is from DC, but he's the only one that moved out here, to Leavenworth, Kansas to work with the government at Fort Leavenworth. So, for most of my life, I grew up in Kansas in the Leavenworth area. And all throughout my childhood and into high school, I went to Wallula Christian Church in Leavenworth. And, you know, I was involved as a kid. I used to sing solos and stuff, and I used to sometimes sing with my mom. We're a very musical family. And I used to volunteer with, like, the smaller kids as I got older. Very involved in youth group, that sort of thing.

I decided to go to KU. And so, KU had—and still has—a fantastic print journalism school. So, I went to KU and I got involved with a group on campus called Campus Christians, which is still going right now. And, I met a lot of great friends there. And I also, at the time, was involved with a church in town called Christ Community Church, and I volunteered there in several different things. So, during my four years in college I was involved in a group on campus as well as in church there.

And then I met my wife my senior year of college—then, my wife-to-be, my senior year of college. She was just starting pharmacy school. So, I graduated in 2001, but she wasn't going to graduate until 2006, so I stayed around in Lawrence for another five years and I worked at the World Company, or, the Journal World downtown. I was a sales manager, doing stuff for subscription sales. I was managing all the advertisements and the efforts to get younger people than 40 to subscribe to the newspaper, which is an incredibly challenging thing in such a dinosaur industry. So, but whatever. It paid bills. It provided, you know, an apartment for us to live in until she got out of school.

And then, you know where the doc basically picks up is that I was creating my own video game levels on the side. That became my portfolio, you know. Sent that out to some studios in Seattle, got a couple offers, and took one of them. Then, pretty much, that's where the video picks up.

Yeah, okay, so then you got connected with EastLake up in that area. How many different sites were going on there at that time? Or was it just when it started?

--It was just about a year, a year and a half old when we started--

--It started around 2005, I think?

Something....mmmm, yes. Yes. 2005. Sure. Yep.

(laughs)

I think so. Uh, but yeah. It was the summer of 2006. And the office manager at my first studio used to go. And there were two services at a Jr. High and there were only about 400 people at the time. And, yeah, so that's when we actually started going. And by the time we left, three years later, they had grown to around 3,000 people. So, they had explosive growth. And they were just—as we were leaving—they were just starting to get into the idea of campusing, like doing multi-sites. So that happened after we had left.

But, it was pretty phenomenal to be a part of that time in EastLake's history. Just to watch, just to be a part of this explosion and growth.

I tried out for the band pretty quickly, and at the time, the lead pastor was also doing double duty. And he was really, like, praying for somebody to come along who could lead the band. So, it was one of the coolest interview processes ever. You know, the ask people that want to try out for the band to go serve somewhere else first. Like, just with the kids, or to greet, or something. Just to make sure that there's not that rock star level of ego there. And then he took me out for a beer at his favorite brewery to make sure that there's no unnecessary

judgment on people who like to have a drink. Because there's nothing in the Bible about having a drink. Drunkenness is a different story.

So, it was really funny, like, it was a fun test. But it was really great. I started volunteering with the band and leading the band a lot of the time up until we left.

Cool. So then tell me a little bit more about the transition into feeling the call to come back to Lawrence and leaving. I know there's a little place in the video that talks about this, and the other guy that went up to—what was it, Wisconsin?—

--Mhm, Dave. Yeah, Dave Nelson.

--Yeah. Talk a little bit more about that, if you can.

Two weeks before that, uh, I don't know. There was a weird discontent about our life there. But it made no sense. It made no sense. Like, I could see Emily and I raising a family there, having kids there, staying there forever, being in the video game industry forever. And she loved her pharmacy. She worked for this, uh, Bartell Pharmacy up in the Puget Sound area. It was local. I mean, it operated kind of like a CVS or Walgreens, but it was more of like a family thing. Loved it. And she worked in downtown Bellevue, which is great.

But, I knew big plans were starting, to come up with a multi-site church. I started feeling this inkling, like, "am I supposed to be a part of this somehow? Like a bigger part of this?" And, it was almost like going against the grain, because everything was going really well for me with 5th Cell, the company behind Scribblenauts. Jeremiah, the Creative Director at 5th Cell, was basically positioning me to be like one of the pillars, one of the faces, of the company. You know, moving forward. So, like, there's no reason to go away from this! But there was still this... there was something else that I didn't really get. And so I was kind of wrestling with it. And I never talked to Emily about it because there was no reason to! I mean, I didn't have any facts or reason to kind of mess with the vibe. So that had been kind of going on.

And then that Sunday happened where I put two and two together and what she said, that maybe we should go plant a church somewhere else, like Lawrence. And I loved that idea. I looooved that idea.

And this, I mean, I think you were going to ask about money, too. Like how everything happens. But, you know, the scariest thing is still that Jeremiah was investing a lot in me. Just a lot of his time in bringing me up. It wasn't even recruiting. It was going to tell Jeremiah that I was going to quit. I wasn't going to quit immediately, it was going to take a process. But, I was going to leave and start a church in Kansas. Like, what do you say to that?

So, we were in this conversation. I had said, "hey, we need to have a meeting," and we went along to his office, and I was like, "alright. I have to let you know. I'm going to be stepping down next year to go back to Kansas to plant a church like EastLake." And he knew that I was very involved at EastLake. His parents actually... I met Jeremiah because his parents went to EastLake. And anyway... and so for one, he said he was really upset, and he was disappointed. He was glad that it wasn't, "I'm going to Microsoft," that I was recruited to Microsoft.

(laughs)

It happens all the time. Um, but then, he said, “well, you know Company-X takes their profits and tithes. They take a tenth of their own profits and send it to non-profits. I bet they would totally support your church.”

So out of the utmost disappointment of me quitting, in the next breath, like he had the presence of mind. Like, he knew it was such a greater purpose, what I was doing anyway, for me at the time, that he was ready to help me find financial support.

He called Steve, who is the Business Developer for Company-X. He’s a good friend of Jeremiah’s, and I knew him through that. I told him the news. And after he said, “oh, it really sucks that 5th Cell is losing you... Hey, you know, we could totally support your church.” Like he didn’t even... Jeremiah didn’t tell him anything about the tithing idea. So it’s like they both had this presence of mind and believed in what I was going to do, even in that very moment, to do that.

So, and to this day, Company-X has contributed more outside financial help than any of the churches that sponsored us. So, it has... this company—of all things!—has financially supported this church more than any of the other churches.

But, that was only a part of it. I had to go around and was looking to get around \$100,000 just to get this off the ground with equipment. We wanted to do set up and tear down. The whole thing. We didn’t want to do a “20 people in a living room and see what happens” thing. Not my style. I launched everything at once. Like, offer full services from the get go—consistency in all the things. Kid’s programs. Everything. And so, it was a daunting task to gather that money.

But, EastLake in Seattle, when I told Ryan, the main pastor, what I was doing, they were very excited. They got Dave on the phone, the Dave that went to Kenosha, and was like “hey, Matt wants to go plant in Lawrence. And Dave was like, “hey, tell him I’m going to be the first church to support him.”

So, in a matter of one meeting with Ryan, with the lead pastor in Seattle, and then in that meeting calling Dave, I already had two churches on board. And I believe Seattle gave us \$20,000. And Great Lakes I think was in for \$6,000 or \$10,000. I can’t remember. No, \$6,000. They were in for six.

So then I met with the lead pastor of EastLake San Diego, where EastLake started, which is Ryan’s dad. The Ryan that was the pastor at Seattle, his dad. Mike Meeks, he was at EastLake San Diego. And I met with him, told him the vision. He’s kind of a... he’s a real hard-ass, actually.

(laughs)

He has no room for sugar-coating, and is blunt and just whatever. Like, if he doesn’t sense that the person can pull it off, they don’t support. So, he had some hard questions. But after that, they were in for \$10,000.

And so, I think with that support, plus, I think the first drop from Company-X was around \$70,000.

That’s huge.

So, we had that \$100,000 to launch with in 2009. It was pretty phenomenal. It was really phenomenal.

Yeah. After launching... so this was all commitments for the launch, then. Did you have any ongoing support beyond launching? Or once you got this going, it was 'alright, we're going to use all EastLake support,' or internal Lawrence support.

Yeah, that was the idea. I mean, Company-X agreed to at least a year, to send us some stuff to really help keep us afloat. But, we didn't launch with any staff. So, we were going to wait until internally that enough came, before I would get hired. Which, I have an outside financial board who decides what I make anyway. I can't set my own salary. So, for various integrity reasons. But, so yes, that was the plan. And for the first two years, I mean, as people got more invested in the church and realized that we were going to stick around, the financial giving increased, which allowed us, by the end of the year to...by the end of the year, that we actually took four full-time staff. Now, we were getting paid like 30 – 40% less than the average church our size. But, that's fine. I mean. That's to be expected for a church plant.

Uh, yeah, so! And as the gifts from Company-X sort of decreased... which was fine, I mean, it was a blessing every single time they did it. I can't even believe they did it. Honestly, I can't believe that they kept supporting us after the initial lump sum. But we were growing, and people's lives were being changed, and so I think for Steve and Company-X, it's easier to keep supporting something that's working, you know?

So that was cool, but, you know the meters... we got more and more internal support, so we didn't have to rely so much on the outside. So, then, of course last year happened and it was a total nightmare, but (laughs)... Uh, yeah, as far as us getting off the ground, we had three churches. And actually, Wallula, let me rephrase that. Wallula, the church I grew up in, in Leavenworth, was in for like \$1,000. Just to see us go for it. So that was really nice.

Cool, and then also in kind of a different logistical aspect, but in terms of getting you into a lead pastor position, as well, did you have to go through assessment and all of that fun? What was that like?

Mhm. Different than I thought. I think most people think that in order to be a pastor somewhere, you have to go to seminary for four years and get a master's in theology or something like that, but the actual thing is ordination. And ordination is completely different from, like, a degree.

So, I went through EastLake's ordination process, which is essentially a really arduous 30-question theology test to make sure that you're all on the same page in terms of orthodox Christian theology. And then, yeah, there was a vision statement, and like a vision essay where you had to, like, write why you want to do this in order to earn being ordained as a pastor to actually go be a pastor. Now you can also go online to be 'officially ordained,' and write your taxes off as a pastor, but no... this was a legitimate ordination.

But then, at the same time, I did start taking seminary classes, too.

(EastLake's Executive Pastor, Ryan, entered the office and to say hi and touch base really quickly with Matt, and also introduce himself to me. This section of small talk and laughter has been left out of the transcription)

Ordination! So... I did start taking seminary classes at Rockbridge Seminary to, yeah, to learn the things that you don't pick up while volunteering. So I did both.

Sweet. And then does EastLake have it's own... is it an Assessment Agency itself? Or did you go through another place for assessment? Or is it all combined into the ordination process? I feel like every church does it a little bit differently, so it's always (laughs), it's always so hard to map how it's done.

There are some churches that have, like, a hard-core 'assessment' thing in order to earn all the stuff... they didn't really have that. What we did do is for all of the people who were being trained to be pastors, whether they were there... well, they actually were having, like, speaking training. Communication training on how to deliver the Bible in a relevant and contemporary way. So, they had that going on internally, and they invited me to be a part of that at the same time. So, you know, I was writing messages and giving it there... it was kind of like American Idol. They had, like, four people just constantly running at me, giving me feedback and all that to help me communicate better.

Now, I actually though, "that's great for me!" I love that sort of thing. Like, whenever I do any sort of project, I go to people I trust and I do want to hear the good, the bad, and the confusing. So... it ends up being a better benefit for everyone else. I don't want to sit there and confuse people or just ramble on too much.

So, that's actually been a core element of our DNA here [in Lawrence] as a staff, as well. I've carried that into here, and we're... every morning, we're like, "what worked? What didn't? What was great? Who were our rock stars? What do we need to change?" Like, that's our staff meeting every single Monday so that we don't have to set it off to an endless amount of democracy and board meetings that don't... they just slow things down. Like, I trust the people that I hired with the vision to be able to do that.

(Ryan popped back in for another quick exchange with Matt. This section has also been left out of the transcript).

So yeah... that whole DNA of evaluation and change is here. So yes, I did go through a process where they kind of sent me through that, as well, as far as speaking goes anyway.

So then I'm going to jump ahead a little bit to the fun 'desert phase.' And really my question there, since you already talked quite a bit about it in your video, but, being the Lead Pastor and being the person that's keeping the vision going, what was it like for you to make sure that all these people that are being thrown around from building to building, place to place, and not really knowing where to go... how did you keep the vision going and spirits up? What was that like? ...and even for yourself, I'm sure.

Um... I think I always knew what to say. Like, in studying on the right way to keep people focused on the vision. I always knew what to say. And I always believed the vision when I was giving it. It was just... it's the difference between racing 80 mph on a full tank versus racing 80

mph on empty. Because behind the scenes, emotionally, and spiritually, it was just an absolute drain... because there was this constant nagging feeling of “where are we going?” So, it was more like a monkey on my back, rather than “I lost the vision” or anything like that.

Yeah.

It was really exhausting.

It was difficult. It was difficult to see.

It's disappointing that just moving around, when your message is that ‘the church is not a building, the church is a family.’ You saw the people rise up and really, they got it. And they stuck around and kept supporting the church. They got that entirely. But then you'd see people that you had invested in... just float away. It sucks. It sucks.

But, you know, I would go home and, like, it was depressing. I actually, it was the first time I started seeing a counselor for depression, because I needed to. And, I was able to share that with the entire church, too, which kind of sucks... because, like, we developed a culture of honesty. Because we honestly believe that the depth of people's hope is only as deep as our honesty. Not just like, “hey! We're staff and pastors! We're perfect!” Like, that doesn't... one, that's not honest. And two, that doesn't reach anybody. It just makes people feel guilty for not being perfect. And, that's terrible.

But, what sucked about it is the fact that I was standing on stage, and I wasn't letting people into that part, because nothing was finished. Like, no, I didn't have anywhere to direct people. Like that little ounce of hope. We don't like to wrap everything up in perfect bows, anyway, and like, we have stories... if you ever go to our website and click on the “my stories” page—

--yeah, I read through those.

Yeah! And so you got videos on there, too. And we don't... it's like, “oh, they went through this mess and they got through it.” But it's not like, “now our life is perfect!” The story is usually that they got to the next step because they're now connected to a family and trying to God the best they know how.

But... I couldn't let people in there. Like, that was the struggle. Like, I'm trying to develop this culture and I'm honest with a lot of things about my life in general, but I couldn't let them in.

I think that—that—made me feel a little spiritually hypocritical during that time. But, from a leadership and big picture perspective, I didn't feel like I could. So that grated on me, as well.

So, and it sucks not being present for your family, and your two year old, and you're just not a fun person to be around. That sucks. Sucks.

Yeah.

And then kind of on a small and more petty level, when surprises would come up—when you'd have to have, like, Ice Cream Sunday in the park and it's a last-minute throw together thing. How do you inform people that come?

Social media!

(laughter)

Social media.

Social media. Social media.

Um, luckily, I think Ice Cream Sunday happened on, like... we found out the Friday, or something, two Fridays before. So, we had a day to turn around. We were able to—I think we got a service in where we were able to say, like, “hey! Next Sunday is Ice Cream Sunday!” And that’s one of the big benefits of this team. Like, everybody is able to roll with changes very quickly and put on something very polished and intentional very, very quickly. And essentially, it’s a spin. But, you spin it for the right reasons... to keep people—and you don’t want to get people unnecessarily depressed about something. Like, there’s an element where you’ll always want to protect your family from it, if they don’t need to experience the heartache.

And so, that’s one of the sucky parts of being a leader, being who we are, as a staff. But, at the same time, we also want to develop honesty, which at some points is like, “alright, here’s what was really going on.” And so, that was really a large part of the documentary, too. Just kind of peeling back that veil a little more.

But, we love the responses that we’ve gotten back from it on Sunday.

The people that were around me were sniffing, and you could see tears when they were watching. And I was like, “this is hitting home for a lot of people who are here.” It says a lot as an outsider, coming in and being able to see what it’s like for people that are in the congregation to be able to have that kind of emotional connection between all parties involved. That it’s not just the people that are on leadership teams and the volunteers that are feeling it, but it’s clearly connected with everyone else that was there, as well.

Cool.

But anyways, to jump then to where you’re at now, and now that you have a secured permanent location, which is clearly so exciting for you guys, um, what are the things that you’re planning for the future? What are some of the ideas that you’re tinkering around with? Where do you see things going, or where do you want things to go?

Well, with new spaces come new issues and challenges in general. So what we do is we look at our bottlenecks. We try to destroy our bottlenecks. And right now we know that parking is going to be a bottleneck, to completely fill that space. But that’s simple. We’ll just tell our regulars to go park at Free State High School.

But then, we need more kids’ spaces. There’s more rooms in the theatre, but we can’t use all of them for a variety of reasons, so now we’re looking at portable solutions for kids. So that’s kind of our next hurdle. Once we figure that out, though, once we get this ebb and flow... if we continue to grow like we were the first two years, if that starts happening... we can’t do evening services or anything like that at the theater. So, we will probably look into the campusing idea.

We’ve talked about it a little bit here and we now have the movie theater south of town. It is owned by Regal, and Regal is a company who is like, “hey, churches! Come, please give us

money to rent our space!” So, we might look into a south campus idea, where we do a live stream down there—live band, full kids service, live everything, but...

Right.

Yeah, it's sort of the same thing that other people do. But we don't know. We've only tossed these ideas around very generally, but... all of that is penciled in. So. I almost talked about it on Sunday, but decided not to. Not to get to it yet.

But, with any church that focuses upon maximizing growth, like, one of the things that people like to, or, one of the complaints that outside Christians like to have is, they'll say, "oh they're just interested in numbers." And, I used to be one of those.... Pharisees, I guess, that would be like, "that church is just interested in the numbers!" But now I'm like, "okay, yes. I'm all about the numbers. You bet. I am interested in more numbers of people being able to have life change. And connect with family. And actually move forward."

So it's kind of a weird thing to me if you think about it, because it's not about the numbers, but, yes. Yes it is. Who wouldn't want more people experiencing a life change that's happening here? Now, if nothing was happening at our church, and like, everybody was just like blank robots, and said, "more money! Bring more people!" or were like some cult... then I'd be very cynical. But, it's like, I want to bring what this church has done for people, what they've done for each other... I do want to bring that to people. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with that. That's what we're here to do. So, yeah. That's why I think campusing would be our next thing.

And I think we've figured out that we can probably top out around 1,000 before—at this current location—before we'd have to start thinking about campusing. But, probably less than that, actually. But yeah, that'll be something we'll start to discuss once we get there.

But kids are basically the bottleneck, because, you know, if it's too packed and, you know, the parents' and kids' experience starts to degrade, well, we're not going to fill the auditorium anyway.

Awesome. Well, I don't want to take too much more of your afternoon, but are there any other things that I didn't think to ask or things that would be a critical part of your history and story, or any other stories that you want to put down, or memories, or anything like that?

I could probably talk your ear off for like five hours, honestly.

(laughs)

One of the things that I love about my staff is that none of us have a perfect, pretty pastor past. And a lot of the things that get swept under the rug in other churches don't. We like to put it out there, and we share how people have gotten through it. And, I love the fact that our staff is not perfect, but examples of using God to get through it. So, we all... we're all, well, except Ryan—Ryan's definitely more of a reserved person—but Palmer and Pamela and I definitely more of the 'mind goes a million miles a minute' people. A little more extroverted, well, a lot more extroverted than Ryan.

I think it's more important to be a real example of honesty and how God heals, rather than perfection, because that's in disappearance. And so it's really awesome, and the reason why I think we were able to stick together last year just as a leadership unit was because we were there for each other instead of letting preferences become bickering points. And so, where in our personality types, egos can be a problem, we don't pretend to go as if it doesn't exist. We are able to call each other out on constantly. We don't let things fester. Especially in this office. And that's one of the greatest strengths that we have, is that we... if we piss somebody else off in this office, we deal with it. We deal with it. We don't let it fester. And it's a tremendous strength for us.

And that pours down. That pours down to our volunteer leaders, and hopefully that pours down to their volunteers that they're leading, as well.

So yeah.

Alright, well I'll leave it at that then!