

Kent Wagner

Founder and Lead Pastor

Epic Church; Wichita, KS

Interviewed by Emily Stratton at Ciao Italian Kitchen, Wichita, KS

June 20, 2013 at 1:00pm

Transcribed by Emily Stratton

Abstract: Epic Church is a recent church-plant around Wichita, KS. It launched in 2009 in Andover, a small community outside of Wichita, but faced many challenges in its early years. Currently the church is in a planning phase, preparing to re-launch itself in East Wichita in September of 2013. This interview features Kent Wager, Epic's founder and Lead Pastor. It discusses Kent's motivation to begin Epic Church and how, logistically, he went about planting it. It also discusses many of the unforeseen surprises and challenges that Kent and Epic Church have faced, and how they have dealt with some rather turbulent beginnings. The interview finishes by talking about upcoming plans for the re-launch, the church's strategy for experiencing congregation growth and building a more consistent financial and human resource base, and how the planning is going thus far.

Note: Interview questions and comments by Emily are written in **bold** type, Kent's responses are in regular font. Emily's introduction (announcing the time, location, and interviewee) did not get recorded, so the interview begins with questions. Because the interview took place in a restaurant, there are occasional pauses to interact with the server, which have been excluded in the transcription. For anyone listening to the recording, there is a significant amount of background noise that often makes hearing the conversation difficult.

So anyways, one of the first things I wanted to do is get a little bit more of your own story. You heard me give a little introduction spiel, but what's your background?

I was a youth pastor for a bunch of years. Before we moved here, we were in Garden City, Kansas. I was a youth pastor out there. And then, after that, we decided to church plant.

While we were out there, I had done youth ministry for six years at that church and about twelve years total.

I don't know how much detail you want...

As much as you want to give! Seriously. You can take it wherever you want. I do have a question though, when you were—so if you're from the Garden City area, do you know of any church plants out there? Or are you still connected with that area? Do you know of anything that's going on out there that I should look at? Because I haven't looked at all at that area.

You know, I don't.

One of the organizations that supports us is wanting to plant a church in Hays, Kansas, but they're still looking for a church planter, so... I don't think that'll happen soon. There's a—I do know that there's a church in Hays called, like Celebration Church, I think. They are... like they've planted in Owen... so really west Kansas. I think they're doing campuses, though, so not like true church plants, but.

Yeah, I'm always interested to see if there are new leads, or if there's anything that I haven't been able to Google on my own.

There's a really interesting church plant group called H2O Church. They planted one in Towanda, Kansas. Towanda's, like, super small. Three or four hundred people. But they're whole focus is, like, planting in rural. And they have like a whole model designed for that. So they, like, they move in, they start a coffee shop, and they start the church with it. They, like, use the coffee shop to get to know people, build relationships, and then start the church.

I'll have to see if I can talk to them. That interesting, I'd love to hear that side.

They're really... all their staff, I think, is bi-vocational. So, they use video preaching and...

... that makes sense.

So then, what brought you into starting up a plant. How did you... how did you pick Wichita? How did that all go down?

When I was in college, I went to Manhattan Christian College and then to Ozark College in Joplin, Missouri and we... the college ended up starting a youth center. It was just, like, skate boarding and all that stuff. So I kind of got, really got into starting something. I really enjoyed creating something from scratch. So when I moved to Garden City, at that time there was a church in Scott City. So that's, like, 45 minutes north of here. And that church had died, or was maybe on the verge of dying. And at that time, the church I was working for talked about sending me up there to basically an empty church. So I went to a church-planting conference.

Do you know about any conferences or are you familiar with all that world?

...a little bit? It's not anything I've ever centered on. I've heard of a few here and there, but I haven't talked with people who are a part of them.

...this conference began... it's called Exponential, it's huge. Like, almost every church-planter goes to that and is influence by it. So I had gone to it kind of in its early days. And going do that... I didn't even know that the world of church-planting existed at that time. I just kind of knew about youth ministry and senior pastors and associate pastors and so, when I found out about that, it kind of got into my blood. I was just like, everywhere I turned... --before that, I'd drive through a town and be like "I wonder if this town needs a church?" but I didn't know that there was, like, a system for starting churches.

So, once I found out about it, I started reading and studying and researching—reading books, mostly, and podcasts. I started to feel very called into church-planting.

So, I talked with my wife about it. She did not feel very called to it. And she was really stuck, like, really having a hard time with why you would need a new church.

What's her church background?

She was Methodist. She's a fairly churched person. And so, she just looked at it like, "I don't know why we need new churches." So, we started looking at statistics. Like, Wichita is maybe, like, 35% churched. Basically, like, every single church within the Wichita area would have to have a thousand people in them in order to have reached the whole population.... Which is just, like, not even close. The average here is, like, probably 80—80 for a church maybe? So, anyway, once she saw that there was this huge need, she started thinking about it and praying about it. And we decided we were in it to plant.

So, I went and talked to my senior pastor about it, and he offered to send us off to, they call it 'assessment.' I don't know if you've studied assessment or anything—

Oh, no.

Anyway, basically they assess your psychological well-being, your relationships. So if you're married, how is your marriage? They assess your pastoring experience. They assess, just, how well you do at meeting new people that you've never met. You know, all these kind of things. And then they come back and say "yes, we think you should build a church" or "no" or "yes, but here's how"...

That sounds like a nerve-wracking experience!

Kent continues: it was intense! Let me tell you. I mean, it was like three days... and so, you're sitting at a restaurant and you know that they're really watching—

There's people watching!! (both laugh)

Yeah! It's kind of like a reality show where you know that they're watching. They're like, "how are you interacting with that waiter?" and "can you make a conversation with somebody who you don't know just right off the bat?"

I would be a wreck.

Yeah, it was... one night, they gave you—I didn't know they were going to do this, but after all these interviews, they were like, "okay... here's this town in Washington [county]. You need to go and come back tomorrow and give us a plan for how you're going to plant a church there." And so, we had to, like, go back to the hotel and all night long work on what a church plant would look like, and make a presentation.

So... it was pretty intense.

Yeah, seriously.

I think that my senior pastor was wanting to get assessed, thinking that they'd tell us 'no.' And then, they could keep us there. And so... but they said 'yes.'

So we stated looking for... they said "yes, but we think you need to plant out of a large church, and like, have them support you and send you." And the problem... so that was like, five or six years ago now? And, at that time churches... the big churches in Kansas hadn't really ramped

up. It was just starting to become kind of a trendy, popular idea to plant churches. But it wasn't like they had really got it to "let's start campuses!" and all that. So there wasn't really an avenue for me to just go, like, "hey! I want to come work at your church, and you should hire me."

So we started looking at organizations around the state that were planting churches with them. Because we're a non-denominational, independent Christian church. So there were a couple of organizations that we were talking to, and both of them were looking for a Kansas City church plant.

Jenni and I both felt called to Wichita, but we started looking at Kansas City. One of the churches eventually said, "we want to hire you. We'll give you \$250,000 in start-up funds to plant in Kansas City." So we, we were like, "this is a hot deal!" So we would go up to Kansas City every couple of weeks. We would look around.

I gave our church a 90-day notice that we were leaving. And, we had just been praying, just trying to decide, "do we want to plant a church here or there?" And every time we'd pick a place, the organization would be like, "ah, I don't think you would fit there." It just never seemed to match up.

And so we were like a month away from leaving [Garden City], and I had literally helped hire my replacement... because I really wanted to leave them well and not damage the church we left. So, we hadn't done hardly any fundraising because we knew that we had \$250,000 for planting a church.

That is a greaaaaat start.

(Kent laughs) Yeah, right?!

That's the highest I've heard from anyone in an interview.

Really?

Oh yeah... by far.

So, we... I prayed and fasted about it for about a week. I didn't really know what we were going to do. We were feeling really conflicted. And finally at the end of fasting I felt like God was saying that he had called us to Wichita. And we would... I kind of came down to it, really, go where God was calling me. Whether there was money. Because ultimately God provides the money.

So... we left the \$250,000. And that has to... well, at first we said, "would you guys support us in Wichita?" And they said, "no, we'll just give you a pat on the back."so that's what we got. A pat on the back.

We turned to Wichita. I literally went and talked to a guy at our church... so I start fundraising right that week. And I talk to this one guy at our church, and I'm trying to sell him on the vision of, like, how I feel like God's called us to Wichita and blah blah blah. And he was like... and I literally broke down, like, crying in his office going, "I think I just made the worst decision of my life! I think... I feel like I've screwed my family..." And I was just a wreck, and he looked at me and was like, "well hey, we're going to take care of you guys." They paid our cell phone bill for like two years. I had another family that gave... I had preached a sermon at the church that

week. And this guy, he owned an insurance agency and said, like, "my kids, after hearing your sermon, they wanted to support your church." And I was like, "oh, that's really nice and cute," you know? And so, they each wrote a check that was like... and they were like 8... 10... maybe 12 years old at the time. And so he pulls out these three checks and he gives it to me, and there's \$800 from these kids that had like--

Oh my god!

--gone into their bank account to help support our church. So I, like, am going "oh my gosh, I can't believe that." You know, just two days earlier I'm thinking "God's not going to take care of us" and then in weird ways... and then the guy, right after that, he goes, "last night I was at a basketball game and my accountant said 'hey you have this investment that you made.'" He was like, "I had forgotten about it, but we got this return on it." And so he was like, "we just wanted to give that to you." So he wrote me a check for \$5,000.

So from that point on, it was kind of like, "okay, God's got this, I just need to trust him."

We moved. We raised about \$150,000 in, like, commitments? I don't know if we ever really saw all of that... But people committed to that for over a year's period. And we... I don't know how much you want to know...

How did you get those commitments? Was it people you knew from previous churches? Friends? Or...

Yeah. I wrote a letter to everybody I know. It was like...

Sorry! I'm not giving you much time to eat!

It's okay! This is what I do. So.

It was like, the letter was to... I call it like your wedding and graduation letters. Like, it was that list that you sent it to everybody, except magnified. Like, if I had shook your hand five years ago, I sent you a letter. And like, I was pretty strategic about it. If I thought that you were likely to give something to me, so if we had a deeper relationship, I sent you a return envelope with it pre-stamped. If not, I just sent a blank return envelope. And so, that way I was trying to, like, maximize our dollars because I knew church-planters who sent out, like, a thousand envelopes and he sent out a thousand return envelopes and he barely ended up, like, breaking even on expenses. So, I didn't really want to, like, screw myself that way.

But we were pretty strategic in that we...and we just sent out a commitment card. We just asked for either a one-time donation or an on-going, you know, monthly support. Or both! You could give us a one-time and an on-going pledge.

I try to be fairly aggressive in our approach here. So like, we moved, we bought... well, so when we came up here, we ended up deciding to plant the church in Andover. I called the school system and the Andover school system was like, "hey, yeah, we'll rent to you. It's fine." So we decided to move over there. And when we actually got here and talked to them about renting, they were like, "well... we're not really going to rent to you."

And, so, Andover is small enough community that there's really like no other place to rent. And so, but we... we had already started to do work there. We had come up before we had moved here, and we were doing events. Like, we were going to this Christmas Chili feed that they have and bought, like, a thousand rolls of Tums and wrapped them with stickers that said "Epic..." I don't remember what it said, it was like, "Epic Relief" or something like that. You know, so we're handing them around at this Chili cook-off, you know, and people get free Tums with it. So we... we just were very aggressive with how we tried to influence the community.

And at first I thought it was going to be very, like, super easy. Like, I sat down with a lady who ran the Chamber of Commerce in Andover and said "the school just said 'yeah, you can rent it from us.'"

So I sit down with the lady from the Chamber and I ask her kind of, you know, "tell me about this city. What's your vision?"

And she reciprocated and said to me, "tell me about your vision for your church."

And I explained it, and she was like, "I've been looking for a church like that!"

And I was like, "do you want to help us?"

And she was like, "yeah! That'd be awesome!"

And I was like, "Done deal! You're in."

And so, I was thinking, "this is the easiest thing I've ever done!" And then from that point on, everybody that I talked to or had written to about it was like, "uh...no, we're okay." Or, they'd be like, "we'll come and check you out after you get started, but we're not going to help you."

So, anyway.

I don't know, I mean, what all do you want to know about?

Keep going! This is a great lead. I'd say just pick up where you left off and keep on going. I'm liking it.

So we... we moved... this will be our fourth year in September of having, like... actually... we moved the January before that. So I don't know when that makes that... 2009 maybe? In January? And originally we just called principals and business men... I just would try to meet people and invite them to be a part of it.

We had—at the Chili cook-off—we'd had a family that had found us, like, they had come to that and... they had just lost—they were married, but the wife had a kid from a previous marriage and she had just lost her daughter. And so for her, it was, she gets this thing [the Tums] and she goes to our website and reads all the stuff. I had been blogging for about a year, trying to create a back-story of who we were for people. So she reads through all of this stuff and she's like, instantly, we're like... we had just moved into our house and, we had put on our blog that we were moving to Wichita, and she like, shows up at our door. And I was like, "okay this is..."

At first I kind of thought it was really cool, you know? And again, it's helping me think that this is all going to be super easy. So we had her and her husband and this couple from another church who was over in Derby that, they had moved over to Andover and the pastor there had said, "hey you should join this [Epic] church."

And so we decided, we were going to do an information meeting. I don't know if you've heard... so basically it's like "hey we're a new church, here's all the information about us, come to our meeting, we'll tell you all about it." We start doing the informational meeting and... we're like... I had gone around to people inviting them first, you know, and all that stuff and we... we ordered pizza for people. We did it at a pizza place. We had balloons for kids. And we were, like, really trying to do it right. And... the only people who showed up were all the people who had already said they were going to be a part of it. And we had two interns from my old youth group in Garden City. So, there's like... the two interns, my wife and I, the couple from Derby, the lady from the Chamber, and this other couple. And one of them brought their mom, so there was ten of us total. And... I was just like, "okay, don't, don't get discouraged, just go ahead and go through with it." Because I was like, all of these people don't really know, so let's just go ahead with the information meeting.

And I had invited the lady from the Chamber to just share how we had met and, you know, that story because I thought it was really cool that she was like, "I've been looking for a church like that!" So she stands up and shares that. And we get done, and I share what the church is going to be like, what getting new folks is going to be... and after that meeting, I go home to facebook people and say "hey, it was really great, you know, that you guys came. I'm really glad you're on our team." And that couple... that lady who had dropped stuff off at our apartment a week before this, she's.... she just was not my friend on facebook anymore. And I was like, "what is going on?" Because she had been so, like, all over... so excited.

So I email her and I was like, "hey... is something... are you guys okay? You know... I just, I don't know what happened. We were friends on facebook."

And, she emails me back, I think, her and her husband. And she said, "if I had known you guys were going to be a Chamber of Commerce church, I would have never of joined in with it."

And I was like, "whattttt??" It was so weird to me.

And in the talk, I had talked about how we wanted to serve the community, and like.... Because my whole philosophy has been: "we want to earn the right to be heard from people." So we try to create an environment where people want to know why we're doing what we're doing.

So, you know for me, it was like.... at the end of the email she says, "if you guys want to—if you want to—serve, you can come over and finish my basement."

And I was going "what in the world!?" And so, I emailed her and her husband back, and I was like, "hey, I'm really—"

You know, at first I was going to email them, like, kind of a mean email, but then I decided it was probably better to just cut ties with them if they were crazy like that. And so I just said, "you know, if you.... You know, I really appreciate you guys coming up and helping us and all the stuff you brought over to our apartment when we moved." I was like, "I understand if you don't want to be a part of it." And I tried to explain, I tried to answer the part of the questions about

who we were. And at the end of it, I was like, “you know, even if it’s odd, if you need help finishing your basement, I would come over and help you.” I just kind of left it at that.

We never heard from her again.

But for me, it was like somebody had kicked me in the gut. I mean, like, in that one evening, we lost 30% of our church because we had these three people who weren’t coming back now, and like, both ____ (?) matters so much in starting a church. And to right of the gate have this... having a negative right out of the gate was... it just was horrible.

So I ended up walking around the streets that night just feeling like I had been kicked in the gut, praying and talking to God. But it really forced me to, like, have to trust God. And so really, it was kind of our experience for the rest of our time. Nobody wanted to come on board.

We would have a couple people come on board and then eventually maybe they would leave for something, whatever reason. But we were doing just so much work in the community that we looked like we were this huge church, even though we had, like, eight people on board.

Like, we bought a moon-bounce, and would... and Andover is weird. So, like, my philosophy was that we should try to find the icons of the community. So, the library in Andover is this fancy-dancy, like, library of the future kind of library. And so it’s kind of a hub for the moms in Andover. And the YMCA there is super amazing and nice. And so, we focused all our energy on those two things, because they already had the clout in the community. And we thought if we could build a relationship through that...

So, at the Andover library we would set up our moon-bounce that we paid \$500 for after every story-hour that they did, twice a week. And we would set it up, have free popsicles for kids, and while the kids were in the moon-bounce, we’d talk to the moms to get to them and build relationships with them and get to know them. And so, you know, because basically we’re in, like, everything that Andover had, every event. The YMCA, all of those kind of [things]...

And if you looked at it, we looked like a huge church. We would bring in missions teams from youth groups. And we would send, like, 50 kids around the city to door-hang houses, and we did an Easter egg hunt that had about 700 people come out to it, and we... we were like... just really aggressive. And my fear was that we were going to launch this church and we were going to end up having a bunch of people come to it and not having anybody to, like, even be in our band or run our children’s ministry or... because, so, I had been shooting for 250 people to come to our launch and I was like, “man, what if we really got that? What do we do?”

So, I went to a big church in town, Central Christian Church, and asked them if they would send—consider sending—people from their Saturday night service to our service on Sunday morning. So they’d go to church there Saturday night and come to volunteer with us. And so they agreed to do that and they gave us, like, a three minute plug on a Saturday night, and we had 15 people come from that. And they joined our team.

And when we had our launch, we had 180 people show up. And, like, our band would come out and they would be greeters. So they would go out, then come back and be the band, and then the greeters would go back and be the Children’s ministry, and everybody would just be playing duplicate roles. It was just... it was insane.

So.

What all church plants have you talked to?

You're the first one here in Wichita. I was actually down here with Pathway and talking about some of their multi-site developments. There's a couple others that I've emailed, but haven't quite gotten a date or time set up. Audacity is one of them, The Seed is another.

I haven't heard of The Seed. I know Audacity, but...

And... I think there are a couple others, but I'm not remembering their name. Um, quite a few in Lawrence, a couple in Kansas City. Topeka? I haven't gotten quite as much going on over there yet, but still, still trying to figure it out. Half—most of my original contacts were all from just Googling. I'd be like, "churches that are in this area!" and I would just kind of run through the websites and think, "alright, which ones are going to fit the profile that I'm looking for?" But, you can't always find everything through Google! So when I find people, I ask for recommendations: "who do you know? What's going on in your town?" So it's partially word of mouth, partially Google, and I'm going from there.

And so, I'm kind of tapping into a bit of a new terrain for me. I didn't mention earlier, my main emphasis for my studies is actually African Christianity and the roles of media in spreading Christianity in Africa. And so I'm switching gears back to the States for the summer! So I'm like, "what's going on with the church networks around here? I don't really know, but I'll figure it out as I go along..."

Yeah, that's cool, yeah.

Africa, huh? That's been one of the craziest things to me. So we've been putting positions on line, like, forever. We hire part-time staff, we really... just reimburse them for gas, so it's kind of not... but, they function as staff members. So, we, you know, I'll put it online on websites for pastors or whatever and I've had so many African missionaries who have contacted us who have wanted to come work for us as a missionary in the United States. I don't know. It's been really interesting.

Is there any region or area, in particular, that they tend to come from? Or all over?

Hmmm... I don't know.

I'd be curious.

That's a good question. I could look it up. I'm sure I still have their emails. I keep every email.

No worries.

So in terms of getting Epic started... So, we've got a little bit of that logistics background, but how did you come up with what you wanted Epic to be in terms of its vision, in terms of its style... even the name. How did you pick 'Epic' to be the name of your church?

I thought it sounded cool, haha!

It does! I was chuckling because whenever I contact people, I'll save, like, my correspondences and I'll use the church name. And so I'm like, "EPIC email!!" Just makes me laugh every time I do that.

Yeah. It's kind of a... I think if we had really blown up as a church, it would have been cool, but... it's kind of been hard... so our church, we had 180 people show up for the launch. We ended up cutting about in half by a couple months later and slowly growing from there to about 120 or so. And so, but... it really sucks when.... And like, half of our people or more are pretty new Christians or, like, have been out of church for 20 years and just decided to come back. And so it's not uncommon to show up at our church—and new people always show up early to church—and they're there, and there's like five people sitting around [them]. And I literally think people look around them and go "this is Epic?" Like, you know, I think it sets you up a little bit for a fail. But...

Anyways, I chose it because I was a youth pastor and I thought it sounded cool. I don't know.

I thought about doing "Connections Church," which would have been... I think it actually would have ended up fitting us better because our mission is "connecting people to God, one person at a time."

And, a lot of it is, like... a lot of that kind of stuff—our mission, our values—was initially.... So like, we did a boot camp for church-planting. And I had studied a lot and knew that we needed to have that kind of stuff, knew the value of it. But, I think, initially, I was just trying to create something because we needed it? Not because it really reflected who we were? And so, probably in the last year or two, I've really refined it.

The mission has stayed the same the whole time: connecting people to God, one person at a time. And that... and initially I just thought it kind of sounded good. It was easy to remember and all those things. But it really does reflect my heart and what I'm about and caring about people. So when you're with somebody, you really care about what you're doing with them and trying to, not just connect people with this huge level—we do that too—but to make sure that we actually care about individuals.

So, that's kind of the... that's our vision. Our vision is that we want to make Jesus famous in the hearts and minds of people in Wichita, in Kansas, and beyond.

So, it's just kind of... I don't know, I would say that's... I don't know if that answers your question. I mean, like, I sat down and just wrote. I knew we needed values, I knew we needed those things, but over time they've become so much more, like, a part of us.

And even, like, our vision used to be that we wanted to plant churches in Wichita, Kansas, you know? But I realized that was, really, more a method of accomplishment. What I feel like my real heart is about is seeing people make Jesus their... like the most famous person in their life, you know. In it for him.

But the church is a means to that.

So that's one of our ways that we go about that, but it's not the main thrust of who we are.

One of the things... we bought a... we moved here and started. We had to buy a ton of sound equipment and stuff. So we put all that on our credit card because we didn't have the funds to really do all of this. And there were several points along the way that we were like, we didn't... we would not take paychecks and stuff. Because there wasn't money to draw off of it? Or we could draw money off of it, but it would take us down the wrong road.

So early on—and it's still very precarious. It's always on the edge of just everything falling apart. I tell people, like, the way I describe it is that I feel like church planting, in a lot of ways, is like walking down this path. And on one side is this huge mountain of snow that is an avalanche risk, and on the other side is a huge, like, drop off. And you have to pretend that neither one exists and just walk.

And I feel like that's what I'm constantly doing. There's always, like, the risk of... I mean, if just a few people in a church out of 120 get mad and leave, that could be an avalanche and totally destroy it. There's always this chance of financial ruin. It's like... and so you just have to walk forward because if you think about any of those things you'll stop moving. You'll stop doing anything of value. So that's kind of where for the last four years we've lived. It's like this constant sense of it.

But God always takes care of us. Like, we bought all this stuff on our credit cards and a few... maybe even a few months afterward? I don't know how long it was. But we had some organizations that came in and saw that we were doing a good job without any backing, without any other outside organizations supporting us. And they came in and said, "we want to help you."

I think to some degree it was like they wanted to put their name on what we were doing? Because we were having some success. And, but I was okay with that because I wanted to get their dollars. And so there was kind of this trade-off. Where like, "yes, you guys can say that you planted this successful church and we'll take your dollars." And so, we were able to pay off our sound equipment and, I don't know, just... it's been a really stretching...

I feel like I've never had to really live on faith before this. So, there's literally times when we can't pay our bills.

Like, I know it sounds like something you hear pastors say, but we really have opened the mailbox and had, like, checks that we didn't expect. And we've never had one of those "it's the exact amount!" But it's like, usually more than what we needed. We just are always taken care of.

And so, it was very hard to do that, to live like that. But, it's also so much more rewarding because I didn't know that God was trustworthy like I do now. Like before, I just said it. Now I really know it.

In terms the years that you've been here, have you had a consistent core in your congregation? Or has it kind of fluctuated throughout the years in terms of who's coming and going? Or a little bit of both?

Yeah, there's, like... the Chamber of Commerce lady still goes. But, she's moving to Idaho now, she'll be leaving soon. So we... and there's probably five people or so that have been there since the very first Sunday we launched. But yeah, one of the things... we have a

constant flow. And I think, to a certain degree, churches are like that anyway. They're kind of a river. It used to be, probably like 50 years ago, that they were this big pond and they just continued to grow, but I think we are just constantly seeing people go through.

And the other thing that I've found... I don't know, so Pathway's a huge church, and I don't know if it's a big deal to them as much. But when you're trying to do church for like 120 people... and for us, there might be, like, 40 kids in that room—so it's a huge mix of population of kids compared to adults. And as you walk into our church you kind of, as an American, expect a little of a certain level of something. So if we were renting schools, or we were out in a movie theater, we had to try to transform those spaces so that you felt like it was church.

So, to do that it took two and a half hours beforehand and then an hour to an hour and a half afterwards. And then doing the whole service. And if you're in children's ministry, changing diapers, and missing out on the entire service—"what happened at church?" And so, you don't get that experience.

What we found was people would come and there's this real excitement that people have when they come to Epic.

I'm a way different creature. I don't know if you've, like, watched any of my videos and whatnot—

Little snippets, but not a full one.

It's okay if you haven't. But, I think I'm different than a lot of preachers. Maybe not, maybe not than young preachers. But whatever. I... it's Epic just has this different feel to it.

People get real excited real quick, and I've kind of learned to not jump onto that and get excited about it. Because what happens is once they realize that it takes a lot of work to pull it off and that we can't really afford to have everybody sitting on their butt not participating, that I think it ends up shedding a lot of people off of our backs, as well.

So, I think that causes a lot of turnover. And I'm trying to produce a level of church where people can respect it at that size, but not we're not having the resources to do it well.

They say in, like, church growth stuff that the hundred barrier is the hardest to break, and I think that's why. Because you can't afford to do the things that are necessary to move beyond that barrier, because you don't have people enough to do it.

So yes... that's my long pastor answer.

Mm. No, it's good. When it comes to setting up and taking down, do you have the same people that are doing it each week? Is it a lot of it you and your own family doing it? Or do you have, kind of, rotating people at this point, where one week someone does it and the next week someone else?

We don't actually do it right now. But when we were doing it, we were... we had people working a month on, a month off. We tried a bunch of different systems. We tried like two weeks on, two weeks off. And the problem with that is, like, if you serve for two weeks, let's say you want to take a week off, and just go visit your parents or something, then you're actually... if you're in

the children's ministry, then you go to church once a month. Tops. And so, we found out that that burnt people out faster. You know, it seemed like it would be easier, because it wasn't for, like, the entire month, but it's not. It burnt people out way faster.

So we ended up moving to a month on, a month off and we never had the people... and part of this, too, is my gift is... I'm not a gifted organizer, like, my gift is on stage and in front of people. And, so, when it comes to organizing stuff, I really struggle with that.

So, what we ultimately did was have your children's ministry people showing up to set up just your area, and you got it however you wanted. You helped unload the trailer. Usually our, like, the band and sound were the first people there. And so they would unload everything, and then you would come and get your stuff and put it in, and then you'd pack it all back up, take it out, and then the sound and worship people would put it back in. It was pretty taxing. I mean, it's... it was really intense.

We would have people take turns, like, pulling the trailers. If we had had the people... I could never figure out how to do this well, but we would have had a set-up and tear-down team. They would have come in early and set it all up and come in after ward and tear it all down. That way you could still show up and serve. We just didn't have the people to be able to do it well. We tried it one time and they struggled with, like, what do they do for an hour and a half after they'd set it all up? So... yeah.

I'm trying to think... I can't remember. What all social media do you use at Epic?

We use facebook and twitter. I don't really use twitter that much because people in Wichita don't... it hasn't really, at least at our church, it hasn't really caught on yet. So...

I don't tweet either. It's a whole other world to me.

Yeah. I think it's dumb. But...

So we just use facebook a lot. Like, we put our sermons on youtube. We put them onto our website. And then, we have audio on our website that feeds into an itunes podcast. So, that... I mean, I pay for Google ads. So, a lot of times... and other churches have figured this out. When we first moved here, nobody paid for google ads. So if you searched for churches in Wichita, we used to be the first, we, like, would always pop up at the top. But now all these churches are doing it.

But, we found that our website was one of the number one ways that people found us.

--it's how I found you guys!

Kent continues: yeah. Right, so I mean, we put those videos on and it was amazing how many people would come and they would already know, like, my preaching style. They would know way more about us than, you know, 30 years ago you'd just have to come and experience the whole thing. But for them it was almost like... not like going to Disneyland, but they knew, like, what the rides were going to be like, they knew kind of what to expect. So, it was just very different. And it was... I think all of that kind of built towards that whole mentality of, like, "we're super excited about it." But, then they'd start to fade off once it really starts to hit—what it means to be a part of a church like that.

Yeah, we met... we ended up launching at the 13th street Warren Movie Theater. So that was really cool, but it had some drawbacks. It forced us to have some drawbacks. An early start time for church. Because, you know, they'd have movie times that would start pretty early, because it's a big movie theater. Everybody in town knew where it was, so during, like, holiday and summer season, we got kicked from movie theater to movie theater. So, like, you might know where the movie theater is, but--

...but which one are you going to be in?

(both laugh)

Right! And they'd switch it around.

And so, that was good. You know, we ended up being there for like... it was February... September to February or something... I'm not so good... I have a degree in something... you're going to have a doctorate.

-- someday!

Someday!

...got a few years to go!

So we... it was funny being in there, because, like, their lights would just pop on in the middle of church. We keep it pretty dark in there to try to control the atmosphere. And one time—we take communion every week—and so, everybody's, like, up taking communion and it's kind of this solemn moment and the music popped on, and it was at Christmas time, so it was “chestnuts roasting on an open fire.” So, everybody's taking communion and it's like, “Chestnuuuuuuts roasting on an open—“ hahaha.

So, our sound guy had been given permission to go up and, like, turn off lights or turn off sound. And I didn't know this at the time, but he went up and messed—was like looking for all the controls for that? And messing up their timer? And one of the employees saw him do it.

I got an email on Monday that said, “you guys have three weeks and then you're kicked out.”

And I was like, “what!? I mean, we're new... what, six months out of it? We're very young as a church, like, we get an email, you kick us out... I don't know what this means for us...”

I had already researched all the facilities in the area. They were either too expensive or weren't a good option, and so...'

I mean, like, we emailed them back. I called them. Nobody responded to me. It's just like we were dead to them.

So, the next Sunday, I come up and I'm like, “hey, I need you guys to be praying because we got kicked out. I don't know what we're going to do. We need to get something figured out.” And then the sound guy's like, “hey... I did this last week and I bet that's why.” And so then I had to call back and, like, leave messages and apologize. And they still never took my phone calls, but...

We got kicked out of the facility after three weeks. Found a middle school that was way.... So the Warren is over here, and the middle school was like five or six miles from that back into Wichita, like hard to get to, hard to see. So we stayed there for about a year and a half and didn't really grow the whole time. We just were stuck there.

We ended up—a new elementary school got built back on this side of town, the east side of town, and we moved to that elementary school. And we were there until October. And we were starting to see some growth and, like, see some potential out of it. And then in October, we got a call from them.

My wife and I were on a retreat and, so we got a call and they said, “we’re... we have this non-taxable bond. The federal government is auditing schools in the area right now and we think they’re going to audit us, and so, if they find out that we’ve been renting to you, we’ll lose our non-taxable status and we’ll have to pay all this tax.” So they said, “this is your last Sunday.”

And, I was just like—

--short notice!

Yeah! I was just... “are you... are you kidding me??” And I told them, I said, “people only come to church every other week.” So I was like, “it’s not like I’m going to be able to communicate with everybody in our congregation this Sunday.” So, they were really generous and gave us two Sundays. I hadn’t planned on being there that Sunday, so we left our retreat vacation and my wife was really upset.

You know, we come back in October and I preached a sermon and just kind of said “this is our moment.” And we were already at, kind of, a financially... because our support had started to trail off. And so we were at a place where, like, we were struggling to even make a payment to make that place workable and I knew that everything else in this area was more expensive.

So we had been renting a church on Thursday nights for small groups and stuff. So, we moved to just doing Thursday nights for a period of time. But, basically I came back with a plan to re-launch our church. And said, “okay, if we would have had all of you the first time, we could have done something really amazing.”

Okay, so that’s where we’re at right now... is we are currently trying to purchase a building on Kellogg. We’re—I don’t know if you’ve seen the website or not, but—we’re meeting as a launch team. We’re now re-doing all of that, like, being in the community... just trying to blow stuff out as much as we can and make a big hit.

We’re shooting for 500 people for our launch, but, I mean really, if we get 170, it will break past that 100 barrier and I think we’ll be able to start to grow.

How are the launch meetings going? And how is progress so far? What stage are you guys at?

We’re doing good. It’s good.

Thursday nights were really hard. Like, we raised over \$80,000 more or less. Some of that is for outreach, some of that is for my salary. Like, a little organization came and said “we’ll help pay your salary.” And one church was like, “we’ll give you \$20,000 for outreach.”

So, we had, like, this support coming back like we were a new church. And... but, while we were meeting on Thursday nights, it was like....

So all that was going well. I get my salary paid for. I came back to tell everybody about it next Thursday, and it was close to Christmas time... and, at that point, like, I literally told everybody that—we had, probably, close to 100 people there that night. And the next week, we had like 20 people.... Because, when you think about it, like, Thursday night before... there’s Christmas parties happening and school concerts and, like, it just destroyed us. And after that on Thursday nights, we were really struggling. We probably had maybe, like on our biggest night, we’d have maybe 60 people, with kids. The average was, like, 40.

So I was going, “I don’t know if we’re going to make it.” Because we had gone from 120 down to that. And our offerings had shrunk. It was really... we had to reduce my salary. Because I was thinking going into it, “we’ll take this money for my salary, we’ll pay my salary, and then what Epic is paying for my salary, we’ll put that towards the building. And so we’ll... it’ll help us get this building.” But we couldn’t do that, because we needed the salary.

And so, we ended up... there were a couple of things that I felt like had to happen for us to survive. One was we had to get back onto Sunday mornings and kind of be a church. Even though we’re still a launch team, we’re large enough that people need something more than just sitting around on couches and talking through it. So, we needed Sunday mornings, and we needed a day for us to launch. Because, the other problem is... you know, it’s kind of like reaching out and jumping to this trapeze bar in October and there was no, like, sense that we were coming back to the other platform, you know?

So we... it was probably, I don’t know, April, maybe March, I don’t know, but we finally were like, “okay, we’ve got to set a date.” So we set a date for September 8th that we would launch our church. We were getting into this contract on the building and had an organization that came in and said they’ll help us purchase the building, and they’ll help us make our payment for the first year. So, all this was kind of working together. The guy was willing to sell his building for a lot less than he had originally wanted.

So we decided... we went on this contract. We were raising all this money and got back to Sunday mornings. We’ve probably been on Sunday mornings for seven weeks now or so? We’ve kind of rebounded a little bit, but we’re still probably, like, now we’re averaging, like, 70-80 people. So we haven’t really come back to where we were. But at least we’re not averaging 40.

So it’s been... it’s all been good and positive. And kind of the people who have really stuck with us are really in. And they really care. And they get it. And they’re doing... they’re, like, a part of it. And we—I created a formula to help our people because it’s one thing for me to say, like, “we want to launch with 500 people.” But it’s another thing for you to understand how that works. Because the average person is going, “okay, that’s great, Kent. You sound crazy to me, you know, that you could actually do that.” So, I created a formula based on our first launch that would help them see how we would reach 500 people.

And, it's basically just a percentages game. We need to reach 89,500 "touches" in our community. If we can hit that, then we'll have 500 people show up at our re-launch... with some marketing on top of that. But... and so, we call them "effectual touches" because... do you care about this stuff?

Oh yeah! I do!

Kent continues like, an event. We take the number of times that we do that event. Let's say we do childcare for teachers for free. And we do that three times. And then we score it on a meaningfulness scale—how meaningful it is from a 1 to a 10. A 1 is I hand you a flyer, a 10 is like I sat down and shared Christ with somebody. And so it's kind of subjective on that? But, it gives us a way to at least evaluate. So if we did that event three times and it was a three, or, four on the meaningful scale, and then take how many people were effected by that. So if there's a hundred teachers and multiply those numbers together, and you get how effective—like, how many effectual touches. So... I'm not very good at math... but... that'd be 400, if you had a 4 on the meaningful scale, and it was a hundred teachers, that would be 400 times 3, so... 1,200. So that's 1,200 hundred touches—effectual touches—right there.

Now, we have figured out that our first time we did, I think, 39,000 effectual touches and we had 180 people show up. So... I don't remember how many... I know that it will take us 89,500 effectual touches for us to have 500 show up. So, anyway, what it did for people though... I mean it's really kind of an arbitrary formula because there's so much that's subjective about it. But, at the end of the day, it helped them go "oh, I see how we can do that."

It's kind of like doing direct mail. You know you're going to get, like, 1% return. So... they know what their return is, they know that they have to invest in it. And so, we've been able to make, like, 37,000 touches—effectual touches—so far. So I think, like, we'll be on target to make the 89,500. And then we're going to do direct mail on top of that. That hopefully... so hopefully when you finally get a mail piece in your deal, you'll get a "oh yeah! They were the people with the superman guy at River Fest." And you'll have had kind of this sense that we touched your life somehow. So, that's kind of up to where we're at today.

How... how soon is all this going to be—what do you do with what you are getting?

Yeah, well. So part of it is... I'll transcribe most of the interviews to help me process what I don't remember from talking and I am supposed to make some sort of a digital humanities project, or, like an online museum exhibit sort of display. And so, I still need to have a little bit more contact with people and spend some more time in services before I can figure out exactly how it will take shape. It might end up being some sort of a photo essay that has descriptions from conversations that I've had with people, it might end up being more of a documentary with sound bytes inserted into it, I'm not sure just yet. But it will be some sort of online accessible something that talks about some of the dynamics of church-planting, what pastors are going through when they're planting it, kind of the logistical side of it... I'm really interested in the 'forms and functions,' so that's, kind of, the things I focus on.

So we'll see! I don't have very much time left. It's only an 8-week internship and this is my 4th week. So I have 4 weeks to finish things off and wrap it up. I spend so much time just researching—

So you probably don't need any more people, you probably need to—

--well I have a lot of appointments still set up, so I—I need to get them done in order to be able to process everything. That last week's going to be killer!

That's nuts. That's crazy.

Yeah, but it's fun, you know? So.

Right.

So I'm always pestering people if I don't hear from them right away, I'm like "hey, there Kent....!" (Emily laughs)

Yeah, no, I'm glad you did! I had your email marked as unread and I opened it back up this week. That's part of the reason why I asked how long, is because, like right now what we're in the middle of is really, like, everything has been thrown up in the air. And I... so ... I didn't want to say something if it got put on the internet. Somebody might find it. Right now... like, in a few weeks it won't matter, but...

Yeah, no worries.

I didn't mean to not email you back. Because, like, my whole world, like, collapsed Thursday night. Because the guy—the organization that is lending us the money is called the Solomon Foundation. And, we had a 90-day contract on the building. It's supposed to be up at the end of this month, and we're supposed to purchase the building and start remodeling it. So... the guy that owns the building has been really gracious to us. He's let us rent it for, like, a hundred bucks a month, which is why we don't have to set up and tear down. We're just in there. And it's not very pretty or very nice, but we can do church in there. So, anyway, this organization hasn't been able to come out until, like, 20 days ago, maybe, tops. And in their process, they have to get board approval for the loan that they're going to give us. And so we asked the owner if he would extend the contract out to us until August 15, which is hard for us anyway, because our launch date is supposed to be September 8th. And... we have to do all this remodeling for the city to allow us to meet in the building, technically. So, we probably aren't going to be able to hit that.

So, we're trying to, like, scramble anyway to figure that out. We thought we'd just ask the owner and that he'd be like, "oh, no big deal!" And when they said, "we need to extend it," he came back and said, "oh no, I'm out. I don't want to be a part of this."

So I was like... it was kind of another one of those moments where I just got kicked in the gut because our history has been so tumultuous already that I felt like—if for some reason this building fell through—that Epic could, like, just end. Not because we want it to, but because people have been just hit over and over again. We're just kind of, like, that "it never seems to work" kind of feeling. And it was starting to feel like we had all these positive things happening...

So, I didn't... I talked with some of our leadership, but we didn't go to the church and say "hey, they turned us away!" ‘

We ended up offering him \$5,000 more. Basically just saying, "we'll just give you this cash. You can keep it no matter what. If we don't buy the building or if we buy the building, it's yours.

And it's basically for your trouble." And, I thought, I was like, "there's no way he's going to do it." Because, he wouldn't wait a month for \$650,000, so what's \$5,000 more going to do, you know?

So he ended up coming in and saying—he came back on Monday—and said he will do that and extend it out. So, we're kind of still displaced. Because if it pushes our launch date back, we have to figure out, kind of almost the PR of that. How do you deal with the fact that we've communicated 35,000 times, or how many ever times, that we're launching on September 8th? And people have... like, we can't control it. People have cards, we gave them pens, it's like... it's been all over. And we can't control that message. We don't have the money to, like, hire a media outlet and say "Heyyyyyy," you know, "it's changing!"

So, it's going to become, like... one of our ideas is that there's a building next door to our building that is for lease, and so we talked about trying to rent that building. We could still launch it at the same date and time, and have people park in our parking lot and have big signs that say "we're really over here until it's finished building!" And that produces, like... you have to pay two. You have to pay a mortgage and a lease. And we aren't really at a place where we can do that. So it's just kind of like we're put into another impossible position of, where again, there's an avalanche and a cliff and I just have to keep walking. And so, it's crazy. It's like...

So right now we're in the middle of, like, it's possible that by the time you're done with this that there's no Epic church? Or that Epic church is like totally thriving.

And I have to learn to live with, like, "that's okay."

Yeah... how is it with the people that are coming to the launch meetings? How is keeping the positivity and keeping the vision going? Is that something that's a little bit difficult?

It's good. But partly because right now... I mean, the reality is that I carry a lot more of it than they do. At the end of the day, they can go home and sleep, you know, and I can't.

So... I share what we need to share whenever we have, like, 'for sure' information. So right now, we don't know how any of that's going to play out. Your moving point's soon, where, like one of the other problems that we're having is... the owner is a very nice guy, but he's doing some things that are upsetting the funder. So we also are walking in the middle of that, trying to keep both parties happy. And so, there's a possibility that one of them will get ticked again and we'll have, there will be a whole other set of, like, events that we won't even get the building.

So, but I try not to share the 'what ifs' because there's no point in our congregation getting really freaked out by that.

I have to think about it, and I have to think about "okay, what do we do if that happens?" And I get our leadership thinking about it. So I kind of manage that a little bit, like, I prepare the people who are going to be in a place where if you're Joe Blow and your just starting church, and this comes down, your small group leader knows about it and they're ready to talk to you about it. Because they've been told. So you know?

Right now everybody, for the most part, very few of them really know—and it's been a little bit more fun for me because last time... it's all the same stuff, it's just, like on a way bigger scale this time. But before, I was the only one going through it. And now, I've got, like, 8-10 other

leaders that I'm sharing all that with. So, even though it still sucks, I'm not alone in it. And I think it's going to be fun for them to look back and say, "wow, God is really faithful. Even though it was, like, scary... we had no way out, but he still took care of us."

I feel like we identify the most with Peter walking on the water right now because—not that we're walking on water or anything good—but there's nothing supporting us financially. We can't buy a building. We can't... we don't have the people, the money, the resources again... we're out walking on water and the only thing that's holding us is our trust in God and walking forward in that.

So we just really... I did a sermon on that a couple weeks ago, but just... so our people are very positive and encouraged. And they're all pumped. They, like, they get it. It's still scary for them, but, the other piece is that a lot of them, because they came from a non-churchy type background, they don't know that church can be really stable. You know what I mean? Ha ha? Like, they don't know that it's not freaky for everybody else! ... and that you have to trust God and you don't know what it's going to turn out like. They don't know that you can just sit on your butt and not... and so for them, it's just kind of like what church is, right?

So, and honestly though right now, Epic relies a lot more on my personality than they probably should or is healthy. But it's just part of a new church and... that's one of the things, as we've grown, we've... the other kind of a whole piece that we do is, we talk about it. We struggle with not having leadership because we started with eight people, really. I mean, it could be worse.

So, like, on our very first Sunday here, you're standing there, thinking, "why doesn't this jerk talk to me?" And then that person is standing there, thinking, "why doesn't she talk to me?" And they both each think that the other person has been there for a long time, but really, everybody around you, except for a few eight people in that audience, have never been there before. So, there was this struggle in catching up with that. So everybody came to connect with me in really an unhealthy way because I was the only one who knew, so I was totally holding everything together.

And this time, I've been able to say, "we're not going to let it depend on me. You guys have to step up and start moving."

So it's kind of changed its DNA. People have started to, like, grab the bull horn. I feel confident that if, for some reason, I die or something, Epic could continue on without me. Where, like, a year ago? I think it would have folded [in a snap].

So, but people still rely too much on me and my personality to lead. That's life, I guess.

Well I don't want to—I haven't even looked at the time...

Kent interjects: you've got a lot going on, huh?

Well, I didn't mean to take you away from everything in your day! But, any other stories or anything else that you think I should know about, or...

I don't know. I, what kind of stuff was good? What do you want?

Um, well, I liked everything that you were talking about. It's all the things I was looking for. But, no, I just always kind of throw that question out and the end. Sometimes people will be like, "oh! There was this one time..." and they'll tell me a funny story, or they'll tell me a sad story. But, the whole entire time, you've kind of been interlacing some stories into what you've said. Just figured I would follow-up and ask anyway. And if you don't have an answer, that's fine too! There's no pressure!

I don't know. I think a cool thing about what you're doing is for people to listen and hear back.

I feel like something that someone told me that was really valuable that has stuck with me throughout this whole process—even in these moments—is that church-planting is a lot more about what God wants to do to you than through you. And I feel like that's really been the truth. Like, it's not... I think a lot of people come into it thinking they're going to do this crazy thing.

And I think God has done really fantastic things. I mean, I had this lady, just the other day, tell me a story and email me and she was just sharing with me all of this stuff that she's gone through in her life, and it was, like, I was sitting here and I was, like, just tearing up because it was like unbelievable, unbearable stuff that men had done to her... that her family had done to her... just horrible, horrible stuff. And, at the end—because, she had kind of shared a little bit of it with me before—she was like, "I thought the first time that I shared that with you, that you would just basically tell me to get out. I can't tell you what it's done for me that you've respected me, even though I'm basically damaged and done."

And it was like... I feel like it's a privilege of mine to be able to minister to people. Like, she thinks that she's the one who is lucky to be there or whatever. And I feel like I'm lucky to get be a part of that story, of like, her being able to come through all of that and be somebody who is overcoming because of what God is doing in her life.

So, I don't know... like that, for me... those are the things that sustain me. Because it is literally hell sometimes.

It's just like... I don't know if church-planters really... I don't think guys who are even successful—my brother-in-law who is, I don't know if you've talked to him, but they... he's the pastor of Aviator Church in Derby, and their church is knocking it out. They're like... they're a year older than us, so this will be their fifth year, and they probably are close to 1,000. They have two campuses. I mean, they have really done a good job. But I think even if you could get to a point with him where he could be honest about it, he would tell you that it has sucked a lot out of him.

And so, I think whatever the world looks at and says is successful to us... for a church-planter, there's got to be things that you find in your life. That's really success. That I was able to make a difference in that lady's life. And then her kids are going to be different, her family's life is going to be different... she's going to have a totally different story than she would have had we not stepped out, had I not sat in that guy's office crying going, "I don't know if we're going to do it!"

So, yeah. That's our story.

No, that's good. I really, really appreciate you taking the time to sit here with me and talk in all seriousness.

Thanks for letting me!