

## The Austin Stone Community Church

Matt's Bible lie open before him, as it had every other morning that week. The day had seemed to offer nothing special, nothing less but also nothing more than the same few hours of quiet study and reflection he'd enjoyed since starting his sabbatical.

*Therefore because you trample on the poor  
and you exact taxes of grain from him,  
you have built houses of hewn stone,  
but you shall not dwell in them;  
you have planted pleasant vineyards,  
but you shall not drink their wine.  
For I know how many are your transgressions  
and how great are your sins—  
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,  
and turn aside the needy in the gate.*

*"I hate, I despise your feasts,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
and the peace offerings of your fattened animals,  
I will not look upon them.  
Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.  
~Amos 5:11-12, 21-24*

*But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the  
Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.  
~Jer. 29:7*

The thought wasn't new. The command to work for justice and the desire to obey it had been in his heart since his earliest conceptions that he would plant a church. When pressed to name a model for his would-be church plant, he couldn't quite come to take his first cues from Willow Creek or Saddleback or North Point. He went off ballot to cite Spurgeon's Metropolitan Tabernacle as the archetype for how his church would look.

His church would be urban when it made most sense to flee the city center. His church would be compassionate when it made most sense to withdraw secure. His church would hold firm and preach the gospel with passion when it made most sense to withhold what might offend.

Seven years and several thousand committed partners into his plant, when most would stop calling it a plant, the Austin Stone had relatively fulfilled his earliest vision. It continued to meet in the heart of downtown Austin and unapologetically preached God's Word.

Yet the prophets' words moved him with a force he didn't expect. They loomed in his head. They ascribed to God much more than a simple inclination toward helping the poor. The God who loves the pure worship of His people was likening their songs to a foul stench when the helpless among them were neglected. What Matt and his fellow workers had been passing as an option for when they had more resources, Jeremiah was commanding of a people in exile.

The timeless words of the prophets came to a timely head for Matt that day. With their current worship space running at capacity and the young church's first possible building campaign on the horizon, Jesus was unfolding a turn in the Stone's story far more distinct than Matt would have guessed.

Fulfilling God's mission in Austin would not be as clean and easy as it felt in the comfort of his seminary classroom, nor would it feel as heroic and self-gratifying as a two-week missions stint in the Global South. It would be marked by sacrifice, frustration, hardship, and even suffering. Faithfully shepherding the Austin Stone to obey Jesus' will in Austin, God was showing him, meant moving a mass of upper-middle class, mostly consumer-oriented worshipers from simply gathering each Sunday to give all they had to follow Jesus every day of their lives.

How that turn and the subsequent obedience took shape for the Stone's leadership team can be summarized with four verbs: equipping, mobilizing, catalyzing, and facilitating.

### ***Equipping***

To equip the church was something the Stone's elders had long since learned was one of their primary roles as overseers of the flock. The words of Ephesians 4:11-12, and the wisdom of God they portrayed in His desire to use the few gifted teachers, preachers, and apostles to train the many, had become a foundational passage for the Stone's leadership development culture. With this new turn however, that role gained only more purpose and more urgency, for it was up to the leaders to properly prepare the saints for engaging the full work of God in Austin.

The elders and deacons at the Stone focus their equipping ministry into three primary channels: preaching from one-to-many in Sunday services, teaching from one-to-many in a classroom, or teaching from one-to-few in a missional community or discipleship setting. In all of these venues the Word of God is taught according to the doctrinal positions and emphases of the elders, meaning with a primary emphasis on gospel repentance and faith toward greater engagement in the mission of God.

## ***Mobilizing***

To mobilize the church, or to give the saints the sense that they were not only trained but also that they were released (or deployed) to engage the mission of God, the leadership team channeled our efforts into two modes of ministry—air war and ground war—and organized our people into missional communities.

Air war is all of our mass-communication, from preaching and worship on Sunday, equipping classes, partnership training, social media engagement, church-wide e-mail communication (via The City), to resource creation, including books, curriculum, and worship albums. To establish the gospel as central in our air war, we take pains to ensure that every sermon, every worship song, every worship environment, every class taught, every curriculum written, and every e-mail sent is consciously directing our people toward repentance and faith in the gospel.

Ground war is all our person-to-person ministry, from missional community, discipleship or coaching relationships, counseling, to the connections between our campus leaders and attenders that happen on Sunday. To establish the gospel as central in our ground war, in as much as we can control, we see to it that the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel is at the forefront of our mind in every leader we appoint and disciple, every missional community we launch, every discipleship relationship we engage in, and every person we counsel.

At our turn towards being missional and being for our city, having both effective air war and ground war was more crucial than ever. For to impart such a lofty vision from the Lord required not merely a single sermon to sell a vision, but a repeatedly cast vision, a helpful and transferable model, and ceaseless admonition for our missionaries to act, repeatedly, and over time. For the truth was that our people wouldn't turn this leaf on their own, even though many of them were hungry for it. They needed us to lead them to act their way into genuinely adopting paradigms and forming habits of lives that follow Jesus and truly restore the shalom of the city.

How we organized our people to effectively engage the mission of God in Austin was through missional community. Though our work to build the Stone as fundamentally a network of missional communities that gathered together on Sundays was already under way, our new direction of engaging the whole mission of God gave our missional communities strategy its full purpose. For missional communities at the Stone are small groups of people, joined by the gospel, pursuing the mission of God together. And what became clear to us and what vision we were now able to give our missional communities was exactly what pursuing the mission of God looked like, and that was both the redemption and the renewal of the pocket of people in which God has placed them. Their efforts could henceforth be directed to not only proclaim the name of Jesus among the lost, but to demonstrate the gospel in their work to restore shalom in the community.

## ***Catalyzing***

To catalyze the church, or to shorten the runway for God's people ready to launch into His work for the city, we took a two-fold approach to establish centers, or hubs for the people of God to better engage in the mission of God.

At an institutional level, we established a physical center for non-profits to more easily accomplish their restorative work, meaning office and meeting space accessible to advocacy groups already working for the city. We called this the For The City Center. Since opening, the building has served as one of our worship venues on Sunday, but primarily the center offices four non-profits and provides meeting space to hundreds of others.

On a personal level we established centers throughout the city for our people, meaning regional campuses for effective gathering, worship, training, and care. The high school gym, where our full missional vision was first cast, has become home to our two Downtown Campuses; the For The City Center houses our two St. John Campuses; two different middle schools play home to our West and South Campuses. The Downtown and St. John campuses are sub-divided into AM and PM campuses, according to the large number of people who attend and the differing demographics between morning and evening attenders.

The campus leadership teams are made up of a campus pastor, a leadership development director, and a connections director. The campus pastor is either an elder or a deacon and is responsible for overseeing all aspects of the campus, including his campus staff, missional community leaders, and volunteers. The leadership director is typically a deacon or deacon-in-training and is responsible for overseeing and developing campus volunteers and missional community leaders. The connections director is typically a deacon or deacon-in-training and is responsible for connecting attenders to the body and the mission of the Austin Stone, primarily by helping ensure they join a missional community.

As part of his oversight of the campus, the campus pastor takes point on coordinating the campus elders for their roles on Sunday. A campus elder's Sunday duties can range from simply being available and welcoming in the foyer before and after service to praying over willing attendees during a special invitation. The idea is that the campus elders, who functionally oversee all the partners and the missional communities attached to a campus, would be available in a consistent place every Sunday for those in need of their care.

## ***Facilitating***

To facilitate the church's ongoing engagement with the whole work of God in Austin, we took a two-fold approach, paralleling our catalytic initiatives. We established a non-profit to connect and foster relationships between like-minded non-profits and also to harbor a funnel to direct our people to organizations seeking volunteer workers. We called this the For The City Network. The FTCN focuses its efforts on community development and connecting people to churches and organizations toward the end of effective and efficient city-wide restoration. Additionally, through our campus leadership teams, we are

launching full-fledged leader networks to foster mutual encouragement, accountability, and care among like-minded missional communities and ministry leaders throughout the city—some regionally organized and some affinity-based.

### ***Conclusion***

What's amazing is that not this space nor 10,000 more words could contain all the initiatives and works we've undertaken since that fateful day on Matt's 2009 sabbatical. Jesus engrained in Matt that day—and shortly thereafter in our entire leadership team—a passion and a mind to see all His work done in our city. Since that day, we've seen Him move mountains through our being faithful to equip, mobilize, catalyze, and facilitate. We couldn't be more hopeful about what He has in store for us—and any other churches our story can inspire.