

Dave Ferguson

MAKING HEROES

INTERVIEW BY PAUL J. PASTOR • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATT McFARLAND

Dave Ferguson is a man on a mission: to multiply a movement of reproducing leaders and churches. Well-known as the president of Exponential, a conference for church planters and multipliers, he also is a key founder (with his brother Jon) of the NewThing church-planting network, operating on four continents. Grounding all this work, Dave co-pastors, with Jon, Community Christian Church, a multisite church with 12 locations in the Chicago area. Outreach editor-at-large Paul J. Pastor sat down with Dave to discuss his key shaping influences, his commitment to being a multiplying “hero-maker” instead of clinging to platform, and the central mission that fuels it all.

Dave, take us back to the moment you knew you were called to ministry.

The passion first surfaced during the middle of my freshman year of college. I didn't have any clear career direction, though I was thinking maybe I'd be an attorney or something. Politics intrigued me. But a question began to play on repeat in my mind: “What are you going to trade your life for?” It sounds kind of grandiose, but it pushed me. Whether the trade would come all at once, or over the next 60 years, I knew a trade would happen.

I began to think seriously about it. I didn't have the language for it yet, but in essence, my heart wanted to trade my life to help people find their way back to God. I had grown up in a pastor's home and had a very positive experience with church and ministry. But trading my life to help people find their way back to God? That was compelling to me in a new way. It wasn't about seeking a pastorate; it was about living a passion.



I thought it through over the next few semesters of college and decided to start a new church that would start other churches. That, I thought, would help the most people find their way back to God—a process of multiplication.

So the vision for multiplying was there from the beginning?

Yes, though it grew. Part of this was the fact that when I was 4 and my brother Jon was 2, my parents moved from rural Missouri to Chicago to plant a church. I grew up in that, as part of a “restoration movement” church that sought to get back to New Testament Christianity. It grew to about 1,000, with people coming to faith and being baptized. They even went to multiple locations long before “multi-site” was a word. Some of that was very formative. I saw church planting as good and natural. (And as an aside, my dad is one of our campus pastors now.)

Who in your life, mentors or otherwise, helped form you in that root passion?

Well, like most of us, my passion took a little while to find its feet. While still in college, I did some ridiculous but super-zealous things. [Laughs.] We started something called “The Soul-Winners Club.” [Groans.] I basically guilted every faculty member in the college to start doing door-to-door street evangelism. I just didn’t know anything else. We saw some people come to faith through it and get baptized, so I can’t knock that, but I had so much to learn.

But let’s talk people. One of the key, indispensable, there-from-the-very-beginning people is my brother Jon. He is one of the most important people in my life. We have done all of life together—from our D & J Lawn Service business as boys, to college roommates, to planting the church together 28 years ago, to founding NewThing, to writing books together in the present day. He is a remarkably accomplished leader, such a vital, integral player in my life and ministry.

My wife, Sue, is a forming influence as well. She’s a

truth-teller, which I need, and has been the perfect complement with her drive and honesty, keeping me grounded and on track with home life as well as church life.

Dad, brother, wife ... these close relationships have been so shaping. God has been extraordinarily kind through them. But I’ve often been in the right place at the right time for other strategic influences, too. Another key voice in my life is Carl George, founder of the metachurch model. Carl encouraged churches built on cell models

that reproduce at every level. When I was just getting ready to plant, I basically pestered Carl to let me attend an exclusive conference where he was presenting, and even though I was a very green, yet-to-plant young pastor, it was formative.

Jon and I joke that Carl was our Obi-Wan Kenobi. If you read our book *Exponential*, in many ways it’s what I learned 20 years before, just applied. “Ah!” Carl said when he visited us in later years. “The unpainted version!” He presented this model of church that was about reproducing leaders, reproducing artists, repro-

ducing at every level. He’d always say, “If you can reproduce micro, you can reproduce macro.” It all made sense. And we began to do it. Everyone on our team grabbed an apprentice leader, and we began trying to live out this idea that church could be its own reproductive model. And of course it worked—with leaders, small groups, large groups, everything.

Lyle Schaller was another vital influence. He was named the most influential Protestant leader in America in a 1988-89 survey, even ahead of Billy Graham. Well, Lyle lived in our area and came to our very first service at Naperville Central High School. We forged a real friendship.

Whenever I had a question about anything, I knew I could find him in our local library. He had this philosophy that if you gave him 40 hours in the library, he could write a book on anything. And he did—with over 50 books to his name. So I’d go with long lists of questions, and our relationship grew. He’d have me over to his house, and his wife, Agnes, would make brownies. What Peter Drucker

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was to church management, Lyle Schaller was to church life in North America, and I learned so much.

Most of the language that my work has helped get out there probably came from Lyle Schaller in his living room. I remember mentioning to Lyle that we were thinking of starting a second site. He said, “There are two things people want to know when they walk into a church: who’s in charge, and who can answer their questions. Oh, and you should call leaders who are the face of the place ‘campus pastors.’” “OK,” I said. “That works for me.” And we took that and went with it.

Now, I love church like I love the Chicago Bears and the Chicago Bulls. It’s like recreation. It’s fun. I love the organization, the leadership elements, all of it. In fact, I have to be careful that I don’t love it more than Jesus. So for me to have access to a brilliant futurist like Lyle, who loved church as much as me but knew so much more, was an incredible gift that God gave me.

I also have to mention Todd Wilson. He deserves a lot of kudos. While I’m the president of Exponential, Todd is the guy who makes the magic happen. He’s the wizard behind the curtain, pulling the strings, and has been important in my life.

One last name: Alan Hirsch. He has been a huge influence. *Forgotten Ways* helped give language to so much that we were feeling. So much of what we do at NewThing either came from Carl George or Alan Hirsch.

Tell us about your early days of planting.

The early days were so fun. Jon and I and our friends were the team, and though none of us made jack, there was such energy and passion. We had 465 people that came to our first service. That was awesome. But by the summer, it had shrunk to 135 or so.

Every church planter goes through the birth, whether it’s big or not, and then the onset of reality. Carl had observed that we’d only grow to the number of people we could properly take care of. So we decided to build small groups, add a second service, etc. We’ve grown almost every year since then—no real surges of dramatic growth, just stair steps at Community. There were disap-

pointments, though—early decline in numbers, and then, within three years, the fact that only Jon and I were left of the original planting team. That was sad, a death of part of the dream as the others moved on. But overall, God has been very kind to our ministry from the beginning.

“Multiplying” has been a key word for you from the beginning. Trace it through the years and ministry that followed your plant.

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Even before we had a public service, we had small groups and apprentices. Our leadership team would go to each other’s small groups to support each other and pretend like it was all fresh—even though we were even doing the same ice-breakers at that point.

In retrospect, though, apprenticing leaders was the key thing that we did. We didn’t have nearly as much intention as instinct, but it was so the

right thing. And the principles we learned in those early groups and apprentice relationships, we kept applying in different-sized groups. When we got ready to go multisite, we were able to say to the church, “All of you have been in small groups that have reproduced. Why do we reproduce? Because we have a leader who is ready to go out and reach new people.” And it made sense to people. It was already part of our culture.

We started reproducing leaders, small groups, services and locations. But it was 11 or 12 years before we planted a new church. Our youth pastor felt called to Denver, raised incredible support and we sent him out with about 35 key people from our church who moved from Chicago to Denver—quitting jobs, selling homes, transferring schools—to help him start the new church.

That’s a moment I look back on that gives me continued confidence in our strategy of multiplying at every level. In that moment I felt like I was losing a really key staff person, a bunch of wonderful families. That loss is real for a church. But it was the right thing to do. That ended up being the first church plant for NewThing. So in exchange for that “loss,” God began to birth a whole movement. There are about 1,200 churches that are part of NewThing now. Though every “trade” looks different,



this kind of exchange is something that we all experience as we reproduce. Every loss brings gains.

That brings up a tough reality: Every multiplication involves a process of letting go. What have you learned about doing that?

Bob Buford has a saying that I love: “My fruit grows on other people’s trees.” I’ve tried to take that posture. We’re using language like “hero-maker” in our ministry. I’m not trying to be the hero of the story—I’m trying to make other people heroes. How can I, over and over again, invest in all kinds of leaders in God’s unfolding story?

But still—sending heroes means you say a lot of good-byes.

Well, at first it was really hard. But once you’ve done it, there’s this principle: Your influence grows in exchange. We “lose” a beloved staff member and key members of our church. But in exchange? They began a whole network of churches that aren’t just influencing the United States, but the world. In God’s economy, you reap what you sow. And that actually happens. So, sometimes I get credit for sending people out in a humble or unselfish way, but the reality is that I benefit from that, too. It makes the process easier when you see the fruit of that for the larger mission.

Let’s shift gears and talk culture for a minute. We are in a time of historic changes in attitudes and demographics. Where do church multipliers fit in the modern milieu?

Some leaders are up in arms these days as faith is in cultural “decline.” I’m not. This is a time of unprecedented opportunity. People are searching more today than any time in my lifetime. Let’s throw a few numbers around: 89 percent of the U.S. population believes in God or some higher power, according to Gallup. Only about one-third says they’re in church on any given weekend. When asked about their religious affiliation, a growing percentage (1 in 5) say, “None.”

Everybody seems freaked out by that. But what’s really happened? I think in the last generation, you’ve seen people simply walk away from faith that wasn’t really faith to begin with—inherited, nominal faith. “My parents are Baptist so I’m Baptist.” More people now have an investigative faith. They’re searching. Those “nones”? Many of them are trying—actively—to find spiritual truth. To find God. We have to help people find their way back to him. They haven’t found what works for them yet. In business terms, there’s a huge market share out there saying that they’ll still buy the product if someone just shows them how it works in their life.

For leaders, multipliers, planters and networks, this is a

time of truly unprecedented opportunity. It’s dramatically increased in the last 10 years. People are in tune with generic spirituality and transcendence, longing to find meaning and truth and wonder. We just have to find ways to help them find their way back to God. They haven’t given up.

In light of that opportunity, what ministry frontiers should we explore?

It’s pretty simple: We need to join people in their seasons of investigative faith.

I have a friend I’ve been praying for for three years. Our boys run cross-country and track together. He has a tragic childhood story of abuse and neglect; he basically raised himself. About 20 years ago, he was in an accident with his best friend, who died brutally. My friend ended up going to jail. When he got out, he moved far away and tried to escape his horrible guilt and pain. Today, he’s a pretty successful executive.

He asked me, over breakfast one day, “I’ve had executive coaches. Will you be my spiritual coach?” “Of course,” I said.

When we began meeting, he began coming to our small group and opening up for the first time about his past. In the process of telling his story and understanding that God could forgive him, he discovered freedom. “I had been carrying around a bag of bricks,” he said, “and I traded it for a bag of feathers.”

He sent me a text at one point that said, “I used to hear people talk about being ‘born again’ and I would call bull----. But now I believe it.”

Amazing. I got the chance to baptize him several months ago. He found his way back to God, but it wasn’t because of any grand strategy—it was because I was present in his life as he was asking big questions. I was simply trying to be a blessing in his life. Stories like this happen on personal and small-group levels, where people find each other and love each other. It’s just a relational thing that anyone can do. And that’s exactly how God meant for the church to work. That’s how people find their way back to God.

I know that’s been your mission statement from the beginning: “Helping people find their way back to God.” If that’s unchanged, what are the areas you’ve grown in over the course of your ministry?

We’ve always kept it pretty simple: large gatherings to celebrate, small groups to connect and going out into the world to contribute. The “how” of those has changed, but the “what” really hasn’t.

In terms of how I have grown as a leader, two things come to mind. The first has to do with money—I simply

had to learn how finances work and to exercise wisdom in that area.

The second is being more in touch with my inner life and health. There are a lot of opportunities God has given to me right now—conferences, networks, writing, speaking. But there are also a lot of opportunities for my life to go out of control.

There’s something that I do on almost a daily basis—what we call the RPMs. It’s a way to gauge my relational, physical and mental well-being. I journal frequently, reflecting on where I am in each of those areas. This is an area of self-leadership, and it’s so healthy. We leaders need to learn how to lead ourselves, every day.

One thing that happens to leaders is that we drift—not usually ending up in a ditch suddenly, but slowly drifting over the course of days, months, years, until we are doing things and becoming someone that we never intended. For me, the simple act of reflection keeps me on track. I give myself a 1-to-10 score in each of those areas, and I’ll put an arrow trending up or down, like the stock market, to show some pattern or direction. It’s not a cure-all, but it makes me stop every day to ask the right questions. You have to start lying to yourself in a profound way to drift past a daily check-in.

You mentioned an “unprecedented opportunity” for mission and ministry earlier. What is it that pastors and planters need to really own for themselves as we press forward?

I want us to change what “success” looks like in ministry. In my ministry lifetime, success has been largely measured by size. “Grow something really large.” I have nothing bad to say about large churches. I lead one. But I would love for our definition of success to be determined not just by size, but by multiplication. “Grow and multiply.”

Now we’re back to the question we started with: “What are you going to trade your life for?” If you, as a leader, want to

leverage your life for impact, it will be by being that hero-maker—the person who raises and empowers others, the leader who multiplies leaders who can multiply. Are you finding younger leaders you can invest in? Can you make heroes out of them? Will you be able to use your growing platform to step right off it and put others on? How do you become the bow and someone else becomes the arrow? How do you invest in others?

I’m a big fan of large churches, because large churches have the opportunity to have tremendous influence for phenomenal multiplication. And what we’re trying to do at Exponential and NewThing and our other efforts is to put people on the stage who may have a significant measurable impact, but have done it through multiplication. We know that as young leaders see different people on a



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platform like that, they'll want to mimic the multipliers.

One speaker we had at Exponential last year was Ralph Moore of Hope Chapel. He'll tell you upfront that he struggles with some self-esteem issues, that he's not the most compelling communicator from the stage. But his ministry has planted more than 1,000 churches. When he starts doing the math, there are hundreds of thousands of people he's impacting. Which, if you think about impact just by the numbers, is X-times the influence of some of the largest churches in North America. Looking at a guy like Ralph, who may not exactly fit the polished, articulate, confident conference-speaker mold, it's possible to glance past this incredible impact he's having. He becomes an example of true success. Pointing to him is an example of what it means to leave a tremendous legacy. Hero-makers can impact not only thousands or tens of thousands, but hundreds of thousands of people over the course of a lifetime.

You mentioned that your love for church is so strong that you have to be careful not to love it more than Jesus. Other leaders will relate. How do you nourish your spirit in the midst of service?

For me, a few things keep my focus where it needs to be. One is the daily discipline of journaling. Corporate worship holds me there as well—saying that feels like a cheesy sermon point but it's true. Truly seeking to worship in our gatherings does great things for me.

But you know what else helps me? When I hear other people's stories of how they found their way back to God. That makes it real. It reignites the original passion. We have—all churches have—the most incredible people, with the most incredible stories—simple stories, tragic stories, even funny stories. As they found their way back to God, they overcame trauma, addiction, loss. They all remind me of what I am trading my life for. To make heroes, to follow this mission, we all share in helping people find their way back to God. That's what keeps my attention where it should be, reminding me that this is about Jesus, not just leadership development or organizational designs, or all those things (that I love!) that can distract me. Watching people encounter God—That does it for me.

We recently had a dinner with about a dozen emerging leaders in our church, people we want to really invest in.

We brought them all together and asked them to tell the story of how they joined our church and team. And several of them found their way back to God at Community. I could feel emotion well up inside me when they each told their story.

What advice would you give the “hero-makers” reading this?

First, dream big. When we started Community, we were a bunch of college friends who had a breakfast meeting to determine what we wanted this church to be. We basically outlined a threefold vision. Phase 1: We wanted to be an impact church, making a neighborhood impact wherever we go. We wanted to be a church that, if we left, the neighborhood would ask what they needed to do to get us back. Phase 2: We wanted to be a reproducing church. Phase 3: We wanted to be a movement. *[Laughs.]* I mean, I was 25, Jon was 23, and my buddy was 21. You almost have to be that young to dream that way.

But that's how we talked and how we prayed—that God would bless us to catalyze a movement. Even when we started NewThing and we had all of about seven church planters sitting in a room here at Community, we'd ask things like, “How can we reach a billion people?” Ridiculous. But don't hesitate to dream that way. Read Acts 1:8—Jesus' dream for the church is the “ends of the earth.” That is a very big dream. We have to grab that big dream.

That brings me to the second point: Start small. The way you do that is simply finding one or two people to apprentice. No matter what you're doing, invest in them. Then, when they think they're ready and you think you're ready (there's no secret formula for this), they are ready. Bring people along with you. Let them hang out with you. Rub off on people. Help them any way you can. Be available. That's what shaped me in the early days, and what is driving my ministry to multipliers. It is small things that can make heroes, and heroes can change the world.

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