

I'm dreaming about Boston's future—are you?



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What's in the heart of God for the Church in Greater Boston over the next several decades?

I've been giving this a lot of thought lately and I've been asking my colleagues for their thoughts. Here are my five basic ideas, five dreams about church planting for Boston's future.

What about you? After you read this over, send me an [email](#) and let me know what you think!

Dream #1: Holistic Churches Multiplying Churches

I see Boston filled with Gospel-permeated, holistic churches.

I can imagine Boston filled with Gospel-permeated, holistic churches. By holistic churches I mean those serving the city with the whole Gospel for the whole person. I see the mission of God in Ephesians 1:10b: “to bring all things together in Christ, both things in the heavens and things on the earth.”

Boston is growing. I moved into Boston in 1971, primarily to do church planting. Its population then was 641,000. In the years since, the population first dipped to 563,000 and then rebounded to 656,000 today. However, we are now staged to grow. By Boston's 400th birthday in 2030, the population is expected to jump to 724,000 or more.

Where will these new Bostonians live? Whole new neighborhoods are underway to house several thousand people each, all within Boston's city limits. Areas like the Waterfront are changing drastically.

Where will these new Bostonians go to church? Will the Church be ready? How many new churches will we need? Which churches will need to grow larger? Who will lead the way to

envision new expressions of Church for new Bostonians? The apostolic task of the Church, a leading task from Ephesians 4:11, is to multiply communities of faith. Is the Church also staged to grow?

- For more on Boston's new neighborhoods, see [Where to Plant a Church in Boston: Areas of Growth](#)
- For more on the apostolic task of church planting, see [Let's Do It! Multiplying Churches in Boston Now](#).

Dream #2. Neighborhood-based Witnesses

I see Gospel-entrenched gentrifiers and neighborhood-based Christian activists salting the city.

Boston is becoming more and more gentrified. Our middle class is declining. To determine whether a neighborhood has become gentrified, researchers identify census tracts that show increases in both home values and in the percentage of adults with bachelors' degrees. I don't like to think this, but I guess I have to come to terms with the fact that in my neighborhood where I have lived for 46 years, I am a gentrifier, or at least I may be seen as a gentrifier by my neighbors.

All over the city, scores or easily hundreds of young Christian professionals have moved into what used to be real down-and-out neighborhoods to be salt and light, to love their neighbors, to do Jesus-style thinking and living in that neighborhood. Intentional Christian communities, where several families or singles live together in shared commitment to each other and to their neighbors, are flourishing. These folks can be what Schlichtman, Patch, and Hill label "entrenched gentrifiers," incomers who, in their own minds and hearts, really do want to appreciate and have purposeful "attachment as to local meanings, heritage, history and people" they are now living near. I think of these people as "Gospel-entrenched gentrifiers." (John Joe Schlichtman, Jason Patch, Marc Lamont Hill, *Gentrifier*, University of Toronto Press 2017)

Richard Florida, in *The New Urban Crisis*, writes, "If we wish to break the cycle of concentrated urban poverty, people-based policies must be combined with place-based policies that bolster neighborhood conditions." Intentional Christian communities, other Gospel-entrenched gentrifiers, neighborhood church planting, and Christian activism in Boston's changing neighborhoods must be neighborhood people-based and neighborhood place-based. (Richard

Florida, *The New Urban Crisis: How our cities are increasing inequality, deepening segregation, and failing the middle class - and what we can do about it*, Basic Books, 2017).

Are churches collaborating to focus on their neighborhoods? Florida writes about “clustering.” His ideas affirm my own that neighborhood churches clustering together with shared infrastructure, shared vision, and clustering force can have a very positive influence on their neighborhoods.

And one more thought: Boston’s Gospel-entrenched gentrifiers are not pioneers, but reinforcements. They join embedded Kingdom-builders — second-, third-, and many-generation Bostonians, young and old — Christ followers who are dreaming big dreams for their neighborhoods.

One such Kingdom builder is Caleb McCoy, a fourth-generation Dorchester resident, hip hop artist, worship leader, and EGC’s development manager. Caleb has a homegrown knowledge of and love for the city. “I believe my role in the church is to help make the Gospel relevant and personal to people that may not feel that God’s plan applies to them,” he says. “I want to communicate God’s love and his Kingdom plans for Boston.” Caleb’s vision is to use his musical and communications gifts to inspire “a revival of young and middle-aged adults, joined together, exemplifying the Gospel through preaching and the arts.”

Author and activist Jane Jacobs famously taught, “City change is not from the top down, it is from the bottom up,” and tells how neighborhood-led, bottom-up activism changed cities for the better. (Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Random House 1961).

I have a dream that neighborhood-based Christian activism will be the engine to drive today’s bottom-up Boston ministry.

Dream #3. Hands-On Redemption

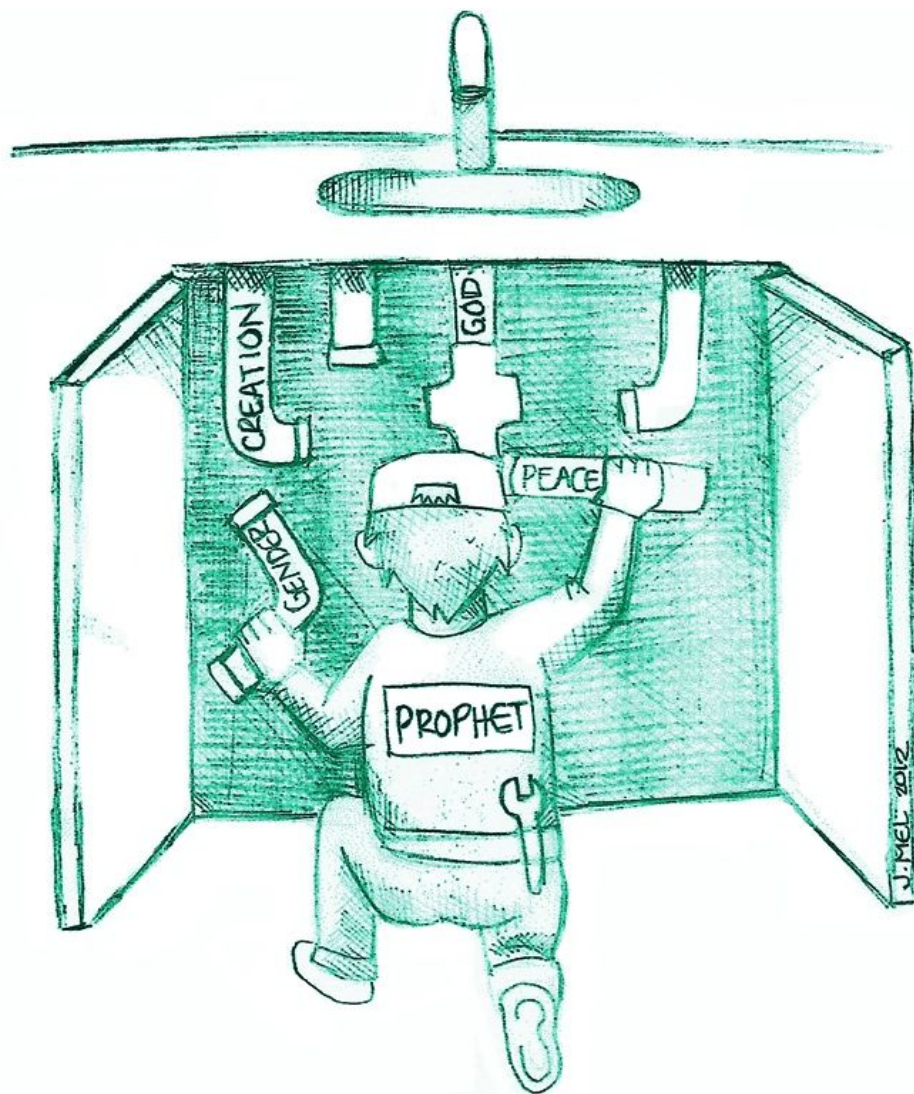
I believe Boston’s Kingdom citizens are reconnecting what sin severed.

If the apostles are the feet of the Body, always moving the Body forward into populations where the Body needs to be and be at home, then the prophets are the eyes, seeing what that Body has to be and look like in that setting.

I am dreaming that Boston will have more visionary Christians with God-inspired prophetic imagination to help design communities of faith to publicly demonstrate the Kingdom of God in every urban context. Boston's neighborhood churches are called to show the Gospel to their neighbors, in all its fullness. "We are a colony of heaven," Moffat translates Philippians 3:20, a Jesus colony incarnated on a plot of earth.

I believe the prophetic task is also to cast a vision for a redeemed creation. Empowered by the resurrection of Christ and the Spirit of God, today's prophets can work to reconnect what was disconnected by sin.

When sin entered the world, it entered the whole world, and not just the human heart, but the very heart of the created order. Original sin instantly caused schisms, what I'm calling the "four original schisms," specifically the separation of humanity from God, of humanity from the created order, of man from woman, and of people from people.



Schism 1

We see the schism between God and humankind in the story of Adam and Eve banished from the Garden, now repeated in all of our lives. Jesus came announcing an end to that schism!

Schism 2

We see the second schism within nature itself. Care of the earth is “by the sweat of your brow, Adam.” Humanity is unclear about our relationship with the created order. Climate change may mean the water in Boston Harbor will rise as much as from two to ten feet in the decades ahead.

Schism 3

The third schism, between males and females, started when Adam blamed Eve for suggesting he eat the apple, which he did, so “it’s her fault”? And this gender schism continues over all time over the whole world.

Schism 4

The fourth schism, people against people, is evidenced by Cain killing Abel and all the wars and killings continuing over the whole world for all of human history.

What is to be done about these four schisms? Thankfully, they were all resolved in Christ, and we, as the Church, can fulfill the prophetic task, proclaim the Kingdom of God, and partner with God in his work of connecting, redeeming, healing, and bringing Kingdom of God life and peace to Boston.

It’s true that not every Boston church can do all four parts of reconnecting as fully as some individuals in the congregation wish they could, but Boston as a whole needs to see the Church as a whole making a good effort in all four areas. Maybe two or three people in this one Allston neighborhood church, and two or three in that different Allston neighborhood church, having a common calling to one of these prophetic responsibilities, could collaborate in their shared Allston neighborhood.

Here’s how it could work. Refugees are coming to Boston today. What will they find? Will they experience more schism in their torn lives, or will some neighborhood church in Boston welcome them, embrace them as valued people loved by God, and begin to effectively reverse the curse of schisms in their lives by loving them well? And if some Boston neighbors observe

Christians in their neighborhood reversing the curses of the four schisms, will these observers be more ready to listen to the spoken Gospel message?

- For more on the four schisms and their resolution, see [The Prophetic Task](#).
- For more on how Boston-area churches are bringing friendship and hope to refugees settling here, check out the [Greater Boston Refugee Ministry](#).

Dream #4: Clearly Proclaiming the Good News

I envision evangelists speaking the Gospel in the languages of Boston.

I want to see Boston gifted with many evangelists, men and women of God who can speak the Gospel in the languages of Boston's old-timers, of second- and third-generation Southies, or Townies, or Dorchesterites. Who can speak Bostonian Gospel to the retired men of South Boston who hang at the coffee shop every day? Or to the women who gather at Ramirez Grocery or Rossi Market, or the generations of men and boys who gather at the corner barbershop? And we need evangelists who can speak the language of Boston newcomers, of freshmen or grad students at BU or BC or MIT, and those who speak the 100+ languages of newcomers arriving from the four corners of the earth.

Who are those individuals who have an amazing preaching gift to move crowds to Christ? Who, already living in Boston, are called to evangelistic preaching in Boston specifically, who yearn to spend their lives preaching the Gospel in Boston?

We know the Gospel is two handed: word and deed. We need to do both: preach the Word and do the Gospel. I think today, particularly, we need to be careful not to focus only on meeting basic needs and neglect preaching. One follows the other. If the neighborhood sees our Gospel in action, I think they will be more ready to have someone fully explain it to them and invite them to believe in Jesus themselves.

And I wonder if five churches, say, that meet in the same Boston neighborhood with many of their parishioners living there, too, could cooperate in evangelistic proclamation in their neighborhood. If not-yet believing people in that neighborhood are already conscious of the demonstrated Gospel, if they appreciate social acts that are on target, those actions that are

particularly needed and being done by churches in their neighborhood, wouldn't that warm up some to come to serious thought and become believers and followers of Jesus?

Dream #5. Church Planters Collaborating Closely

I want to see church planters getting in each other's faces, setting goals, being mutually accountable, passionately focused.

This morning, on a neighborhood run, I stopped at the One Dalton Street residential tower being built just a few blocks from where I live, next to the Christian Science Center. It will be tallest residential tower in New England, 61 floors high with 160 luxury residences with totally unobstructed views of the city on floors 25 through 61. One of these luxury residences has already been sold: \$40 million, the highest sales price for a housing unit ever in Boston! You can see why I am concerned about church planting in a remarkably gentrifying city.

I asked a construction worker there how long before it will be up to full height. "Due date is October 15," he told me confidently. A skyscraper topped off on October 15, 2017 exactly? Wow. Setting time goals apparently is critical in the world of builders of skyscrapers. Church planters and church-planting-minded churches are in the skyscraper-building world, too, building the Kingdom in Boston. Time goals need to be taken more seriously by us as well.

Here's a reality check. A few days after I wrote that last paragraph, I talked to another worker there. He thought January was the date rather than October and explained all the reasons why. But I won't erase from this blog my first conversation and stated date, because setting dates is still a good idea.

Collaboration is another great idea. The Greater Boston Church Planting Collaborative started gathering in 2000. And we chose the word "collaborative" very intentionally. Collaboration is basic in the Book of Acts, the church-planting storybook, and should be in Boston. In Acts' history of earliest church planting, we see nothing but collaborative ministry efforts. One church, one basic team, one overarching goal everyone shared and worked toward — that's the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, who were the first church planters. Boston is a small big city, many Christian leaders here know each other — many very well, some at least a little bit. Many were born here or have come here and stayed here for decades because they felt called here and still feel called here, to Boston and Boston alone, even for many decades or a lifetime.

Now I want to see Boston's church planters getting in each other's faces, setting goals, being mutually accountable, passionately focused. I can imagine church planters setting Boston-wide church-growth and church-planting goals collaboratively, spatially and even timewise — setting 6-month, 12-month, 2-year, 16-year time goals.

“How long will it take you to build the wall, Nehemiah?” King Artaxerxes asked. Nehemiah, a slave in a foreign land under a tyrant, was the last person in a position to promise his purpose-driven time goals. But he did tell Artaxerxes his time goal, because he had to. And he did it. In fifty-two days!

Send Your Thoughts!

So those are my five dreams about church planting in Boston. What do you think? Are you dreaming with me? Dream big! When we get some more ideas, we'll share them in a future post. Send me an [email](#) and let me know what you think!