

## **Introduction**

At the end of June 2012, I was a member of a 'vision' team from Grace Community Church, Fulton, Maryland, that traveled to Brussels, Belgium, Leiden, The Netherlands, and Bielefeld, Germany in order to explore possible partnerships in Western Europe as a part of Grace's global missions strategy. Europe is currently a new 'focus area' for Grace and this team was meeting and experiencing some ministries in person, the very first vision team of it's kind to Europe for Grace.

Grace Community Church is located in a Maryland suburb midway between Washington DC and Baltimore. Grace is a faith community of around 3000 people and its county, Howard County, is one of the most affluent counties in the US. Typical congregants are mid to upper class, young families, highly educated and with professional employment.

Brussels, Belgium functioned as our base of operations for the majority of our time in Europe. Brussels was chosen because of its similarities to Grace's context, elements which included: affluent city/suburb, highly educated and achievement culture, large demographic of government/military employees and associated support structures, a majority of people in professional, white collar vocations. There are 11 million people in Belgium with 1.2 million people residing in Brussels. Latest statistics count evangelicals at .2% to .5% of the population.

The four guiding values for the Europe strategy are: reaching the emerging generation, an urban setting, a church reproducing movement, and our desire to learn from European ministries given the post-Christian environment. Our vision team attempted to use these criteria as a baseline for evaluation.

I also currently serve as one of four advisers to the Global Missions Director, Patti Hewat, and was part of a team that helped retool the missions strategy through a process that lasted from May 2010 to October of 2011. The other Europe team members included Kristen Parlette, Carver Pugh, Lisa Taylor, Wayne Miller, Alexandra Menton and Ken Davis.

## **Meetings**

### **EFCA/Serve the Church - Daniel Ritzman - Brussels**

Our first host the day we landed was Daniel Ritzman. Dan and his family are originally from the US and have lived in Brussels for 15 years, working with EFCA (Evangelical Free Church of America) for the entire duration. Dan is also the lead pastor for an Armenian church - Brussels has an abnormally high number of ethnic church plants. Dan was a great host, walking us through some of the tourist sights of Brussels while decoding European post Christian culture for us. EFCA has four different church plants that their staff are working with - one of these being Dan's Armenian church. We later heard from two other leaders for these church plants.

We also heard about EFCA's Serve the Church initiative, which intends to connect churches within the city to share resources and encourage each other. Serve the Church runs some activities during the summer such as a basketball camp. We visited a new property where a few churches were meeting together. We had lunch with an EFCA church planter named Scott, originally from Oklahoma. Scott and his family have been in Brussels for 8 years and most of their ministry is centered around spiritual conversations in third places - pubs, cafes and restaurants. His church structure is highly relational and organic.



Later that evening, we met with Olivier Jonkers who heads up a church plant called The Lighthouse, which numbers about 60 people on Sunday evenings of mostly young people and young families. The Lighthouse is the only church in Belgium to be a satellite location for the Willow Creek Leadership Summit and he identified leadership training as a specific need.

Some of the spiritual insights from Dan and his team: Most Belgians don't believe the church is relevant - they have either been let down by the church or they hate the church. Religious pluralism is dominant here - besides Islam's growth, there are Buddhism, mysticism and fortune telling influences as well. There is no God consciousness here - people do not have the kind of spiritual background you would probably find in the US. Some people have started using the term 'Christian community' here instead of the word 'church.' Volunteerism is not a big value in Europe. There are 2 Christian book stores in Brussels - combined, they are the size of a small cafe.

### **Serve the City/The Well - Carlton Deal - Brussels, Belgium - Friday and Saturday, 29 and 30 June**

Carlton serves with Christian Associates, who originally planted a church called The Well. The Well is a mix of incarnational/attractional <sup>1</sup>- combining different 'expressions' which are different focus or styles of gatherings for people, based on specific spiritual goals or affinity or interest groups. For instance, they have serving, prayer, and friendship expressions three weeks out of the month. Their all church celebration service is once a month.

Serve the City was started in 2005 as a response to getting people interested in service projects in and around Brussels. It has morphed into a platform for involving both believers and nonbelievers that are interested in serving their city and has expanded to 80 cities around the world. My wife and I had met the Deals originally in 2007 when we served with a Grace student team in Hungary working with the staff conference of Christian Associates.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The Shaping of Things to Come, Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost

<sup>2</sup> <http://tonytsheng.blogspot.com/2007/08/hungary-brain-dump.html>



We spent one day with STC which started with us worshipping with a Flemish speaking church at the beginning of a one day prayer seminar. There were around 30 people at the church, mostly middle aged with a few younger people, with worship done in both Flemish and English, although I think they did the latter for us. Our group then headed over to the Marolles district where STC was meeting that morning.

Marolles is more of a working class neighborhood - this was most noticeable when we ran into some kids near a cluster of apartments on a shared playground.

There were about 50 people serving with STC this day, which was the first day in their STC week that they run every summer. Included was a team from the Deal's home church from Norfolk, VA, who were actually staying in our hostel as well, a team from South Korea, and many people who call Brussels home. I spent some time getting to know a middle aged Italian woman who came to STC because she cared about the city, but was completely distanced from Jesus and the church, telling me that church was completely irrelevant to her life and the culture at large. She was in Brussels because of a job with the EU and to me, typified many people who lived there.

All teams had the task that day to pick up trash in specific areas in Marolles. To STC, it was a good deed but also represented a presence in that part of the city that was executed each first day of a STC week. The short debrief at the end of the afternoon was led with the idea, "We weren't just picking up trash, we were \_\_\_\_\_," with people filling in the blank with more significant ideas about serving Brussels.



Carlton and Shannon also met with us individually that evening where they unpacked a bit more about The Well and STC. Here are a few ideas that resonated with me:

- + the church is driven by mission first - what is our mission here in the context of being God's people contributing to the redemption of all things.
- + expressions are led by trios of three people: equipping normal people, doing church in their neighborhood, nothing grows without conflict and trios seem to be able to resolve conflict best.
- + like meeting in public spaces when they can.
- + they are a church without a back row.
- + what is God's mission for this city - we should align with this.
- + Brussels loses 40% of population every year due to transitory nature of working with EU/NATO. We should see this as 'scatter and gather' - equip them and send them out.

**ICF Lieden, - Lieden, The Netherlands - Sunday 1 July**

I was introduced to ND Strupler, one of the staff of the ICF [International Christian Fellowship] Movement<sup>3</sup>, via Larry McCrary from the Upstream Collective, in June of 2011. ICF is a church planting movement that originally started in Zurich. Since 1999, ICF has planted 30 churches in Western Europe and they have a 2 year church planter training process. ND is one of the point leaders.

After doing some research on ICF, Patti also connected with ND and went about setting up opportunities for us to meet their team and see what they were doing. This resulted in us going to Leiden, the Netherlands and Bielefeld, Germany, two of their more recent church plants - both in close proximity to Brussels.



Leiden is a small university town of about 150,000 people midway between The Hague and Amsterdam, 10 minutes east of the North Sea. Arie Spaanderman<sup>4</sup> is 35, married, father of one daughter and is the lead church planter. Although we didn't see specifically who was on paid staff and who wasn't, our team was hosted by a variety of people from the church, including an older husband and wife and their daughter, three twenty something young guys and various others who prepared lunch, hung out with us in the lounge and opened their homes to us for the night. With that kind of welcome, Arie has a very hospitable team.

We attended two Sunday evening services that were located in a community theater in the bottom floor of a university dorm. Both services were high energy with next generation worship music and a 20-25 minute sermon from Arie. The music was in English and the message was in Dutch. Their team transforms the foyer of the theater into a lounge area for both services, bringing in their own furniture, refreshments and ambiance, and Arie repeatedly mentioned the idea of the European values of quality, creativity and celebration.

Arie has visited the US a few times and told of his appreciation and influence from America's large churches such as Saddleback and Willow Creek. His vision includes a church of 1000 people and the first church plant within the next 5 years.

Various other comments from Arie included:

- + On church: "Attending church every week is a big commitment for Europeans"
- + On church leadership: "You need an open feedback culture"
- + Are you an early adopter church: "Yes"<sup>5</sup>
- + On leadership selection and development: "We look for chemistry, charisma, potential and obedience to God in potential leaders."
- + And one of ICF's values that I love: "a church that is at the heartbeat of time."

## ICF Bielefeld - Bielefeld, Germany - Monday 2 July

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.icf-movement.org>

<sup>4</sup> <http://twitter.com/ariespaanderman>

<sup>5</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diffusion\\_of\\_innovations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diffusion_of_innovations)



Manuel Pohl is a 27 year old married church planter. His team included his wife, his brother and his girlfriend and another young lady, all of them around the same age. Manuel is the only full time staff at ICF Bielefeld, and the other people on his team work regular day jobs. ICF Bielefeld numbers around 50-60 people in their Sunday gatherings. We didn't attend a gathering but did have lunch with Manuel and his team as well as a quick tour of the city and a short time of him sharing some ICF leadership principles.

Bielefeld is a medium sized city number around 200,000 people with 20,000 university students. The city is growing although there is not much tourism here. A big demographic of late has been a migration from Russian Germans. This team told us that the culture here is insulated - not many people make eye contact or go out of their way to be friendly. Manuel's team also mentioned the low birth rate that Germany has and that the Turkish are having many more babies. I was impressed with Manuel and his team. They have the right mix of audaciousness and humility. They are friends banded together by mission. The coaching and training they received from ICF seems top notch and I'm excited to see what kind of progress they make.

We returned to Brussels later that day via train. Our home base for our time in Brussels was at the Norton House, a mission house owned and operated by the Brussels Evangelical Mission. Barry and Corrine, originally from South Africa, live there as missionaries to host and support visiting missionaries. Their hospitality was amazing. The next day was spent doing some more debriefing of what we saw both informally and formally. We also spent it as a free day, taking in some of the sights. Carver Pugh and I flew home the following day, while the rest of the team stayed on for one more day.

### **Brussels - Various Cultural Observations**

Belgians love their flowers - they lay a huge flower carpet in The Grand Place every other year.

The Grand Place was voted Europe's most beautiful city square.

25% of the population in Brussels is now Muslim, growing at a rate of 10% every year - it's the fastest growing demographic. We saw a lot of burkas.

The most popular boys name in Belgium is Mohammed.



Even though you hear church bells all the time, most churches are now museums.

There are fortune teller ads in the paper all the time.

'Gospel' is a non threatening word here - they only know it in the context of 'gospel music.'

### **Resources/Contacts**

## The Upstream Collective - Jet Set Tours

The Upstream Collective is a group of former missionaries and missionary mobilizers that exist to help churches with global missions strategy. One of their core competencies is a 'jet set tour' where they help church leaders travel around a specific city, engage with the culture and hear from some on the ground missionaries about their work. This kind of trip is very similar to our vision trip.

<http://jetset.theupstreamcollective.org/>

## Jet Set - Brussels, Dublin and Belfast

Jason Egly serves as the lead pastor for a church in Nashville called Ekklesia Nashville. I connected with him on twitter when Upstream was hosting a jet set tour in Brussels. His report is filled with great information as well as some practical action steps for how he believes his faith community needs to grow.

<http://ekkleasianashville.com/take-aways-from-brussels-dublin-and-belfast-jetset/>

## Kyle Goen

Kyle is a church planter that relocated with his family from Smyrna, Tennessee to be part of a launch team from LifePoint Church [different than Craig Groschel's Lifepoint] to Brussels, Belgium. Kyle was one of the hosts of the recent jet set tour. We connected via twitter and offered to assist and meet with our team, except he was out of the country when we were in Brussels. His blog also has some great insight into moving a family cross culturally.

<http://www.kylegoen.com>

## Personal Reflections<sup>6</sup>



I consider my time in Europe to be extremely valuable on a several levels - for our vision team from Grace, for my role with Ember<sup>7</sup> and how we could possibly continue to help student mission ventures and personally, as a futuristic developer. Here are a few quick reflections:

+ Our time worshipping with the Flemish speaking church was just fun. It gave me a new appreciation for what spiritual communities look like in a city that is unreached.

Certainly it was one morning with one faith community, but if that was any representation of other Christ followers, there is a vibrancy and hunger that's captivating.

+ I'm still inspired by our time with the team in Bielefeld, Germany. I don't want to sound old, but those leaders look so, so young. And that's the gist - four 27 year olds who started a new

---

<sup>6</sup> Copied from my blog - <http://tonytsheng.blogspot.com/2012/07/reflections-2012-belgium.html>

<sup>7</sup> The Ember Cast is a student missions nonprofit that I started in 2010. I participated in two missions experiences this summer. One was this vision team and one was an Ember experience to Queen Creek, AZ. These trips were not specifically related. Grace student missions was a client of Ember's in the Spring of 2012.

church to reach their friends and change their whole city. They are serving and being released by an organization with some solid leadership development process and a history of provable results. They are indigenous and have an inherent understanding of their context. They are wholly committed - all in - and believe that they can transform their city on the way to changing the world. It might be tempting for us to help encourage or fund or support them. Those all might be possible or we may just need to cheer them on as we get out of their way.

+ 40% of the population of Brussels leaves the city every year. As Carlton Deal said we should see this as growing and sending them instead of a loss due to transition. Highly applicable to our suburbs outside of DC.

+ STC Brussels is on to something - it is a clear example of the flip between believe->belong versus belong->believe. I had a very spiritual conversation with a very kind Italian middle aged woman who was in Brussels because of her work with the EU. She wasn't interested in church at all, but came to STC because she cared about her community and wanted to serve her city.

+ Leadership in trios - groups of 3 leaders that work together.

+ What is God's mission for this city and how can we align ourselves with that?

## **Conclusions**

Here is some feedback based on the four guiding values for the Europe strategy:

### **Urban**

Brussels is the crossroads of Europe. The city has residents from every part of Europe living there due to NATO and the EU. Every demographic and economic strata is represented in the city. Immigration is a constant and real tension. As a European urban center, Brussels is should be considered highly strategic.

### **Church Reproduction/Emerging Generation**

ICF seems to do a fabulous job in coaching, mentoring and releasing church planters. Cultural relevance and a high commitment to the Gospel are both core values for their teams. Although I didn't see any other specific church gatherings during our time, for instance, The Well, Lifepoint or other ICF gatherings, what I heard in conversations with ICF leaders seemed to convey that they are serious about both reproduction and reaching young people. We would seem to have much to learn from them about preparing young people, releasing them, and how they navigate a culture that is pluralistic, post Christian, and probably most challenging, changing faster than we realize.

### **Learning from the Future**

The attractational come-to-us approach to church does not work in Europe and the case could be made that it's time in the US is coming to an end. When addressing church planting or church growth, we should make sure that trend is part of the discussion, keeping in mind that although we may not see it now, we may see it in the near future. Not only is this issue related to cultural shifts, it is also impacted by intergenerational ministry leadership. Culture in the US is shifting fast, moving towards a post Christian landscape. Baby boomers, who are used to attractational style churches, occupy the majority of leadership roles in US megachurches.

Brussels is a global city. And global cities have people in unprecedented transition. This is highly relevant to us in the Washington DC suburbs, which have been similarly transient. The combination perspective of having a specific season with people plus training and releasing them well requires a paradigm shift to leadership development, Kingdom thinking and the stewardship of talent. Do this poorly and we've stifled numerous gifts. Do it well and we will have exponentially impacted the Kingdom.

Prepared by: Tony T. Sheng, July 2012. [tonytsheng@theembercast.org](mailto:tonytsheng@theembercast.org) | 410-988-4591