

Matt and James were friends before they were brothers in Christ. The consistency of that friendship displayed the hope of the gospel to James.



# Not my dream, but God's

*How one small Toronto church plant grew by giving people away.*

By Tobin Perry

**A**s Toronto church planter Matt Hess read a church planting book by an expert he respected, he came to a sentence that shook him...

*You shouldn't plant a church until you have a core group of 50.*

"I have five—and we all have the same last name," Matt thought.

Discouraged, he went down to his basement and cried out to God. The Hess family had recently arrived in the fourth-largest city in North America with the overwhelming conviction God had called them to start a church—Fellowship Pickering.

Matt didn't have a clear vision of what God wanted to do in the new church, but he did have a call.

"I know You told us to come here, and I know You want to do something special here, but I don't know what it is," Matt told God.

Opening his Bible, he flipped to the gospels.

The more Matt read, the easier it was to see Jesus' pattern of multiplication. He noticed how Jesus developed The Twelve, then the inner circle of Peter, James and John and then specifically focused on discipling Peter.

Matt realized God wasn't calling him to start a mega-church in his new adopted city—but multiple churches spread throughout the Greater Toronto Area.

## Undercover discipling

First, God gave Matt a vision for multiplication.

Then God gave him James Greaves.

Weeks after that ministry-altering encounter with God, Matt went door-to-door in his neighborhood.

James' door was one Matt knocked on that day. James grew up in a family that rarely talked about spiritual matters, but he listened to Matt politely. When Matt invited James to be a part of the

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church's core group and to attend their first informational meeting, James decided to give it a shot.

"I spent time around them afterward," James says. "They were some of the sweetest people I'd ever met. It was there that some of my preconceived notions of church and God started to break down. But I still had a long road ahead of me."

Matt invited James into his life on a regular basis. When Matt ran errands, James tagged along. Whatever Matt, his wife, Arrica, and their kids were doing on Saturday, they invited James to join them.

"I got a chance to see how Matt's family and the people who were around in those early stages of the church treated others," James says. "I saw things they would do for people. Our relationship was just undercover-disciplining me."

## Developing a church planting pipeline

At the same time, Matt continued working out the vision God gave him to start 12 new churches in 10 years. To do that, he had to find more church planters. The most obvious limitation wasn't resources, and it certainly wasn't finding places in greater Toronto area that needed new churches.

The limitation was leaders.

Fellowship Pickering needed a church planting pipeline, a way to grow leaders for the compelling mission in front of the church. The more God cultivated His vision within Matt, the more Matt understood that the future leaders and church planters were in the harvest.

## Finding a church planter in the harvest

Matt still had no idea one of those future church planters would be James. He hadn't even committed his life to Christ. But Matt kept faithfully sharing the gospel with James through words and actions.

During the preview service, Matt began a series entitled "Googling God," where he answered some of the most common questions about Christianity. James carefully listened to the series and began to reflect upon spiritual matters.

Around the same time, James' grandfather died.

"In desperation, I began asking God tough questions I had never asked before," James says.

When James was asked to speak at his grandfather's funeral, he turned to Matt for help. Matt turned to the gospel. At his grandfather's funeral, James shared the gospel for the first time—before he was even a Christian.



Discipling relationships are an intentional part of all Fellowship church plants.

Because of Matt's faithful witness, James became a follower of Jesus.

## A new church in Bowmanville—and beyond

Matt developed a process that allowed him to spend consistent time with the potential church planters in his congregation. His wife, Arrica, also invests heavily in future church planters' wives, mentoring and providing discipleship.

"The biggest thing for us is to nail down the calling," Matt says. "If we can nail down the calling, everything else falls into place we've discovered."

One day while he was traveling for work, James called Matt.

"Hey man, I need to talk to you about something," James told Matt.

Matt braced for what came next.

"I don't know how to say this, so I'm just going to say it," James says. "I really think I'm called to ministry. I think I'm called to preach and plant churches. I don't want to do anything else with my life."

That was five years ago. Since then, Fellowship

Pickering has started three other churches, and Matt continues to disciple James. At times, Matt and James have had to press pause on church-planting plans as James worked through different challenges in his life, but they have persevered.

This fall James will launch Fellowship Bowmanville. Though the church will share a name, it will be completely autonomous from Fellowship Pickering. And, in keeping with Fellowship's conviction to build multiplication into the DNA of each new plant, James is developing leaders who can help start new churches in the city even as he makes plans to get Fellowship Bowmanville up and running.

One of the future leaders James is developing is Harley McLeod, who he meets with weekly. Just as Matt did with him, James helps Harley apply the Bible to personal and ministry issues in his life.

"Right now we're working through developing an 'oikos map,' where we put ourselves in the center of the map and then draw lines to people we're most in contact with," Harley says. "It's a great way to visualize how we can multiply as we share the gospel."

As Matt looks back on the six years since the first Fellowship Pickering service, he can easily see God's faithfulness. Fellowship Bowmanville will be the church's fourth church plant. Thanks to their church planting pipeline, the church plans to start three more in the next two years. Between all Fellowship churches, more than 150 people have been baptized in the past four years with more people coming to Christ on a regular basis.

It hasn't been easy. With every new church plant, they've sent out some of their best leaders—both the church planters and the teams they've taken with them. They've given away a seasoned missionary and his family, an elder candidate, committed children's ministry leaders and more to help start new churches.

But God is faithful.

"This isn't my dream; it's God's," Matt says. "When you live with open hands, He does really incredible things with your life." **[OM]**

*Tobin Perry is a freelance writer.*





Looking for laborers in the harvest is a sustainable and biblical model for raising up church planters and other missionaries.