

CHURCH

ON THE PORCH



JEFF SUNDELL

Jeff Sundell spent ten years of his life spreading the gospel among Tibetan Buddhists in northern India and Nepal.

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There was no way Jeff could reach this people group alone. He began training local believers to make disciples and plant churches. Jeff learned to ask five questions:

- How do I enter an unreached region and connect with people?
- How do I share the gospel?
- How do I make disciples who disciple others?
- How do I form groups in the community that will reproduce?
- How do I develop and multiply local leaders?

Jeff sought out examples of the best practices from anywhere in the world where he could find a Church-Planting Movement. He then applied these lessons to his setting. He learned that a Church-Planting Movement is a work of God through his Spirit and his dynamic Word.

Jeff learned to teach new believers to obey Christ. He learned to identify leaders, not by their knowledge and gifts but by their obedience, because obedience is at the heart of any Church-Planting Movement. Local believers with little or no education faced persecution with courage and boldly declared the gospel. They learned to obey what they knew. Jeff discovered that a disciple who is obeying the little he knows is on the road to maturity.

Over the years Jeff and the leaders he trained equipped thousands of local believers to share the gospel and plant churches. Across the region tens of thousands of new disciples formed new simple churches—many of them in regions where there is official hostility toward Christianity.

In 2009 the Sundells moved back to the United States and began applying what they had learned to their new situation. They moved to an old mill town in North Carolina that had been in economic and social decline since the 1970s. Unemployment was high, and drug and alcohol abuse was a problem. With help from the police, Jeff identified the three toughest neighborhoods in their county—Henrietta, Alexander Mills and Spindale—and chose them as his mission field.

Jeff met with pastors in the wider area to cast vision and offer training to anyone who was interested. He gathered a small group of men and women on Monday mornings and began training them how to share their story and Jesus' story. They then went out prayer-walking in one of the three neighborhoods, and they looked for opportunities to connect with people who were far from God.

These areas are known for their pit bull dogs and methamphetamine labs. As Jeff and his coworkers met people, they asked, "If God could do a miracle in your life today, what would it be?" Then they prayed for people on the spot.

Jeff recruited his mom and dad, Norm and Paula, to the team, and they began walking and praying. On their first day, Jeff's parents visited an African American neighborhood. The day didn't begin well when Jeff's "Yankee" father asked two middle-aged women, "How are you guys?" They thought he was addressing them as men

cancer. They prayed for her.

Norm and Paula began a simple discovery Bible study with Randy and his drinking buddies on Randy's porch. They read stories about Jesus and asked, "What does this say about God? What does this say about people? Is there a command to obey or an example to follow?" Norm had them reading the story of the four friends who lowered the paralytic through the roof so that Jesus could heal him when Randy realized he needed to do something about Ruth's condition. Since Ruth had been diagnosed with cancer, she had missed all her medical appointments out of a combination of fear and her drinking problem.

Randy and his buddies knew this, and when they read the story of the four men who brought their friend to Jesus, they knew what they had to do. Before Ruth's next appointment, they stayed up all night to make sure she didn't get drunk. The next morning she arrived at her appointment on time.

The Bible studies on the porch continued until one day

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Jeff's dad got a call from Randy saying, "I believe! I believe!" Ruth also gave her life to Christ. Six weeks after his conversion, Randy told Norm, "You know I'm an alcoholic. Would you pray that I'd get healed?" Today Jeff's mom and dad have a

and began cursing at him. (A real Southerner would have asked, "How are y'all?")

Norm and Paula persisted in the conversation, however, and eventually one of the women, Ruth, asked them to pray for a severe pain in her chest. The other asked, "Just pray I'll get through the day." Jeff's parents prayed for them and promised to visit again.

A week later Jeff's parents returned and met a man named Randy sitting out on his front porch drinking even though it was only 10 a.m. Randy's porch was the place to hang out if you wanted to party. He invited them to come back and share some stories about Jesus.

Norm and Paula moved on and visited Ruth to pray for her. Word spread that they had returned, and a woman called Annie came looking for them. She'd heard there were some folks praying for people and wanted them to pray that God would provide a stove for her and her family. They prayed for her—and for a new stove. A few days later a friend of the Sundells heard about the need and donated a stove.

The next week Jeff's parents were at Annie's house enjoying the cookies she had baked on her new stove when Ruth came banging on the door. She wanted prayer. The doctor had just told her that the pain in her chest was breast

ministry on the porch praying for people; they ask "that alcohol would taste bad in their mouths." They also pray for people to find work and God answers.

Randy, Ruth, and other new believers in the community consider that porch as their church. The porch used to be the place where parties happened. Now no one is allowed to drink on the porch. Instead those who are still drinking bring their bench as close to the porch as possible so they can listen in while the church meets around God's Word. Over twenty people have been baptized, and disciples are meeting in three simple neighborhood churches. One of the groups meets in a hotel room.

Jeff and his coworkers continue to prayer-walk the community. They pray for the needs, share their stories, share the gospel and make disciples. Discipleship can be a challenge as new believers grapple with drug and alcohol addiction and fractured relationships. Some of them are still using drugs or living together. Jeff never compromises what the Scripture teaches; he knows that making disciples takes time.

Some time later Jeff met with Neil Perry, pastor of a growing church in nearby Forest City. After planting the church, Neil found himself preoccupied with counting "butts on the seats." Over a three-hour cup of coffee, Jeff

helped Neil discover how he could get back to making disciples. One of the new believers in Neil's church was Chuck, a former crack cocaine dealer who had run a prostitution ring in his basement. With Jeff's help, Neil taught Chuck to make disciples and plant churches. Now

AFTER TWO YEARS, OVER 350 PEOPLE ARE GATHERING IN 73 GROUPS. OVER 250 PEOPLE HAVE BEEN BAPTIZED. JEFF HAS IDENTIFIED 45 PEOPLE IN THE NETWORK WHO ARE EFFECTIVE IN CONNECTING, SHARING THE GOSPEL, AND REPRODUCING DISCIPLES AND CHURCHES.

Chuck runs a simple church for his former friends and associates in the basement where he once sold cocaine and ran prostitutes. A pastor in Spindale, Andy Evans, has also connected with Jeff and is training anyone who wants to learn to make disciples. One of the new believers is a former cocaine addict who has formed a church in a trailer park with twenty baptized new believers.


It's a long way from the Himalayas to North Carolina. Jeff has been able to adapt the principles he learned in Nepal to a very different context. He still asks himself the same five questions.

1. **How do I enter an unreached region and connect with people?** Jeff prayer-walks the community, looking for opportunities to connect and praying for needs. His purpose is to find households of peace that connect him and the gospel to relational networks.
2. **How do I share the gospel?** Jeff shares his story, and he shares Jesus' story. He offers a series of simple discovery Bible studies called *Seven Stories of Hope*.¹
3. **How do I make disciples who disciple others?** Jeff and his coworkers do not do anything their disciples cannot copy. They teach new believers to share their story and to share Jesus' story. They teach new disciples to ask, "If God can do a miracle in your life today, what would it be?" Then they ask, "Can I pray for you?" They train new disciples how to take a friend or family member through the *Seven Stories of Hope*. All they need are the stories and four simple questions: "What does this teach us about God? What does this teach us about humanity? Is there a command to obey? Is there an example to follow?" All the learning is obedience-oriented. At the end of every study, the leaders ask, "How can you obey what you have learned today?" At the beginning of every study is the question, "How did you obey what you learned last week?"

4. **How do I form groups in the community that will reproduce?** Jeff believes that churches come from disciple making, not the other way around. He teaches communities of new disciples the basics of life from the book of Acts—worship, ministry, fellowship, evangelism and missions, and discipleship.

5. **How do I develop and multiply local leaders?** Houses of peace become church communities. Multiple churches are formed simultaneously. Jeff trains existing believers and new believers to make disciples and form groups.

After two years, over 350 people are gathering in 73 groups. Over 250 people have been baptized. Jeff has identified 45 people in the network who are effective in connecting, sharing the gospel, and reproducing disciples and churches. Seventeen of them have equipped groups to reproduce between two and four generations of new groups.

Jeff's example and training is inspiring a growing number of people to apply simple church planting methods across the United States and Australia. Those he has influenced are identifying houses of peace, baptizing new disciples, and forming new neighborhood churches in their communities. In doing so they are imitating Jeff, but Jeff himself is imitating Jesus, because Jesus is the Lord of a missionary movement that Jeff and his friends have joined. 



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