**Canadian pastor finds new flock with The Gathering**

By Jim Burton

WINDSOR, Ontario – John D’Antonio’s family knew that his four-year battle with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), or Lou Gehrig’s Disease, would soon be over. Many of his Italian-Canadian family and friends had gathered in his Windsor hospital room to say goodbye to the 30-year-old father and husband.

Just before John’s diagnosis four years earlier, his family had moved next door to Garth and Patty Leno. Leno was the pastor of one of Windsor’s largest churches, and John’s mother, Italian immigrant Elena, was a faithful member. On this most difficult of days, the family called Leno.

Leno arrived at the Windsor hospital around 11 p.m. and entered a packed hospital room. The family had requested a reduction in morphine so that John could communicate with them. John’s wife, Mary Anne, gave permission for Leno to be alone with her husband.

“Could I just have the room with John for a few minutes, please,” Leno had asked.

John couldn’t talk and he was having trouble breathing.

“John, if you can hear me just squeeze my fingers,” Leno said, then felt pressure from John’s weakened hands.

“John, I’m not going to waste any time because there is no time to waste. I just want to talk to you about heaven.”

Leno then explained the gospel, God’s grace toward us, the plan of salvation, and that it’s available to any man or woman at any stage of life.

“Do you believe this?”

John squeezed Leno’s hand.

“Can I pray with you and for you to trust in Christ alone for your salvation?”

John again squeezed Leno’s hand.

When Leno said “Amen,” the room was full again. One by one, family and friends had slipped quietly back into the room, standing behind him. They heard John’s declaration of faith through the prayer.

As the senior pastor of a large church in the city, Leno could have dispatched any one of his 20 staff members to the hospital that night. Now the pastor of a Canadian National Baptist Convention church plant called The Gathering, he has only two additional staff.

“One of the most delightful things that has happened to me is that I’ve rediscovered what shepherding is all about,” Leno said of The Gathering. “When you are planting a church and making disciples, you get to see life-change happen up close. I wouldn’t change that for anything. Church planting has helped me rediscover what it means to be a shepherd and really take care of the flock.”

**A shepherd without a flock**

Garth and his wife, Patty, spent more than 30 years serving churches in a denomination that began to alter important doctrinal positions and has seen no net gains in Canadian churches in many years. Then, during a three-month sabbatical, struggles within the church erupted that eventually led to Leno’s departure.

He could have turned in any number of directions. The child of an alcoholic mother and a “weekend drunk” father, he grew up feeling rejected and lonely. Despite his genetic predisposition for alcoholism, he joined other teenagers as a high school student and began getting drunk on weekends.

“The shadows grew very long and I lost my way,” Leno said.

After high school, he met a girl from a Christian home. As he spent time with the family, he saw parents who were “rock-solid believers in Jesus,” and he knew they had something he wanted. After 13 months, the girl’s mother explained the plan of salvation.

“That afternoon I trusted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior,” Leno said of his 1976 decision.

More than 35 years later, he found himself in yet another lonely place. He never expected that church planting would be so difficult and isolating. With his wife, Garth started a Saturday night Bible study mostly with people who were “disillusioned with church.” What started in their home in September 2013 soon moved to a local golf clubhouse, and before long they had outgrown the place.

“Maybe we should start a church,” Leno joked one evening. He did not expect the overwhelming response. Everyone agreed they should. Someone said, “Whenever you are ready, we are ready.”

When their close friends made that offer, Patty began sobbing as wounds from their last church were still fresh.

“Seriously–planting a church was the last thing we wanted to do,” Garth said. “But it was obviously the first thing that God had in mind for us.”

Leno had no job leads–secular or ministerial–when he met Wayne Parker, pastor of Merriman Road Baptist Church in Garden City, Michigan, just across the Detroit River from Windsor, the southernmost city in Canada. Parker is the North American Mission Board (NAMB) Send Detroit City Missionary, and he was collaborating with a Plant Midwest seminar. Parker knew about Leno’s Bible study, and had one question, “How can we help you?”

Leno wasn’t sure what help Parker could offer, but he was quite sure he didn’t want to associate with another denomination. Yet Leno also connected with Andrew Lamme, the Canadian National Baptist Convention’s lead church planting catalyst for Southern Ontario. Multiple telephone calls of encouragement to the Leno’s soon followed, along with emails, and offers of help, something they rarely received in more than 30 years with the other denomination. He also began to receive valuable resources, training and mentoring through the NAMB’s Send North America initiative and other Southern Baptist church planters.

With counsel from Parker, Lamme and others, and an affiliate with Canadian convention, Annie Armstrong Easter Offering® (AAEO) funds soon helped Leno and his following of “disengaged and disenfranchised” people secure and renovate a warehouse for The Gathering. The Gathering is also part of Send Detroit, NAMB’s church planting strategy for the metro area surrounding the city.

**An atypical church plant**

Leno now knows that The Gathering was an atypical church plant as the core group had already gathered. Though he has a lifetime of pastoral experience, he’s now an enthusiastic student of church planting, even working toward a master's degree in church planting at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C.

“I’m learning as much as I can about church planting,” Leno said. “I’m like a sponge.”

He’s learning about creating an invitational culture, sparking evangelism, transformational discipleship, hosting summer camps and mobilizing mission teams to help The Gathering conduct the camps.

“We’re talking about intentionally engaging this city with the gospel,” Leno said.

God is doing something so special among his weekly 220 attendees that one senior pastor from a large sending church in Tennessee said, “I’d like to take some of The Gathering back home.”

Garth and Patty modeled hospitality with the Bible studies that started in their home, and that value shows at The Gathering. With Elena Sorrentino taking the lead, The Gathering Place is the church’s coffee and snack area at the back of the warehouse-turned-worship center where people hang out after services and talk, which delights Leno’s shepherding heart.

Starting a Baptist church may have been foreign to Leno several years ago, but his church is on board now, particularly with missions giving. In its first year, The Gathering collected $9,350 for the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering® (AAEO) for North American missions. The second year resulted in more than $13,000 given to North American Missions through AAEO.

The Gathering is now assisting other church plants and plans to sponsor one soon in a nearby town. The shepherd loves his flock and wants his church to be a church planting church.

Meanwhile, he enjoys the changes God has allowed him to experience through church planting.

“I have become much more kingdom-focused,” Leno said. “I’ve become much more gospel centered. Discipleship is key. Prayer has become more valuable to me. It’s a more important tool in the toolkit than it has ever been before.”

*Garth and Patty Leno are AAEO Week of Prayer Missionaries for NAMB. Half of the funding NAMB receives to support, train and resource North American missionaries comes through the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering. Learn more about the Leno’s and other missionaries at AnnieArmstrong.com.*

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*Jim Burton is a photojournalist and writer based in Atlanta. He formerly served Southern Baptists as the director of Volunteer Mobilization and Mission Education with the North American Mission Board.*