

# The Project SoL Report



*Episode 8: March 2022*

## Jeff's Voice

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ... I want you to know how grateful I am for you ... for all your prayers and support. The Lord is doing amazing things among us, to grow us and mold us into the likeness of His Son, whom we love. We trust Him. We are confident in His great, redeeming, renewing, disciplining, nurturing, strong, tender, everlasting love for us (and for you).

This adventure has been so different than what anyone expected, and very hard. But hard things can be very good, and the Lord's work among us in this season is certainly very good, though painful. We thought it would be edifying and help to guide your prayers if each of us shared our own individual perspectives of what God has been doing in our lives and in our midst. So, that's what you'll find in this report.

In addition to the prayers the team has already expressed, I would ask...

- Please pray for my humility, that I would increasingly turn to Jesus with the desires and concerns of my heart, step down when I'm tempted to step up, and learn to love others well.
- Please pray for the transformation of my mind. My desire is that my identity be rooted unshakably in Jesus, who is my Rock. But still I struggle with allowing my identity to be linked to my accomplishment. So many sinful expressions of my brokenness flow from this one lie (that my identity and accomplishment are connected).
- Pray for my struggle with depression, which is getting better as the Lord has been such a tender Father to me. But still I struggle regularly with the voices of condemnation and shame.
- Pray for our neighbors – that the Kingdom of God would come in power, that salvation and revival would engulf this whole area, that the enemy would be driven out of his strongholds in this place.
- Pray for physical healing – for my back, which is giving me problems, and for my eyes, which continue to decline.

## Kayla's Voice

We have mentioned in previous reports that God seems to be doing deeper work in us. He is more concerned with what He is doing in our hearts to transform us, than what he can do through us or use us for. Though our life and ministry looks similar to our last update, we are learning what it means to submit to this work. The Lord is using this time to heal wounds, highlight unhealthy patterns, and help us learn to love one another even when it's really hard.

The enemy often spurs on division or distance among our team through our own fears. When we notice something in someone else that bothers us, it's easy for us to jump to conclusions or make wrong assumptions about each other. Much of our discussions over the past couple of months have included learning to communicate better so we can gain a greater understanding.

We've learned a lot about relationships. It's easy to have acquaintances, but to be truly relational requires both commitment and sacrifice. It requires vulnerability, self-giving love, and humility. We each have wounds and trauma that impact how we relate to one another. We're learning to identify these things and speak truth into them. This sometimes requires the courage to call each other out and sometimes the grace to listen humbly.

It's been important to seek healing from God and each other so that our ability to be whole and minister to others from a place of wholeness is not thwarted. If we don't know how to love well, be vulnerable, or be honest, how will we live an authentic faith? When it comes down to it, ministry is relationships. That's what Jesus was all about. The work he's doing is often slower than we would like and often in a way that makes us wonder what He's doing. I think all of us have swayed between faith and doubt in the tumultuous unknowns. We have doubted ourselves, God's plan, and each other. But that's where we're at. There's not a big firework ending all tied up in a bow. We're stuck smack dab in the middle of it. So much in the middle of it, that it's hard to see where we are or where we're going. We don't know much else right now, but we know God, and we're waiting and wondering (and sometimes doubting) with Him.

## Michele's Voice

I've been in a reflective mood lately. As I look back at a little more than a year ago in January, we had just said goodbye to one of the other ministry couples who moved down here; all of us with grand ideas of planting a church. I think back to the rest of the team that was just starting to realize that starting the church before we did the relational work necessary to becoming a team had resulted in frustration, hurt feelings, discouragement, an erosion of hope and ineffective ministry. But after several months of trying to communicate and understand what was getting in the way of being unified, we started talking about pausing from going full speed ahead and giving God a chance to do the deeper heart work in each of us that was needed. Personally, I look back and realize that out of my enthusiasm to be involved with this grand experiment, I did not speak up when my feelings were hurt or if I needed to address a conflict or a misunderstanding. Early on we realized that each of us was very different in what motivates us, how we see success, what we value and even how we communicate. That led to a lot of miscommunication, making presumptions, assuming motives and passing judgement before true understanding was reached. I am a peacemaker both between people and within myself. However, I was fearful and avoided conflict at all costs. It took me many months to realize that I wasn't living obediently to the Lord, keeping short accounts with my team members, addressing conflict as it arose or speaking up when I had insight into the relational dynamics that were at play. In doing so, I became smaller, more passive and ineffective, a very unhealthy version of myself. Instead, I needed to fully participate in the difficult work of addressing conflict, extending forgiveness and offering all of myself to my team. For me, confrontation is terrifying after a lifetime of people pleasing and trying to conform to the expectations others. I felt that God had equipped me through my own healing journey to call our team deeper into healthy relationships. Having to speak hard truth, no matter how gently, is difficult, but necessary for the sharpening of the body of Christ. Learning to be vulnerable, risking rejection, and being misunderstood are painful. But Jesus calls each of us in the body of Christ to shed our self-protective layers and live and speak honestly in the context of loving community; whether we are a ministry team or just brothers and sisters in the Lord. Our American culture does not value cultivating vulnerability and relational living, but that is what Jesus modeled. It is easy to relate to people from behind confident facades and present the best version of ourselves, but in doing so, we lose the opportunity to truly know people and be known. This past year God has led our team on a journey of realizing that doing big things for God is not as important as seeking intimacy with Him and allowing Him to do big things in us. He has been revealing our pride, weaknesses, fears, insecurities and sin. He is calling us deeper to more honest relationships with Himself and each other that allows us to lay aside the things that so easily entangle us and learn to love each other deeply & sacrificially from the heart. I believe God is doing the deep heart work to humble us and ground us in Him so that we are more fully living out the gospel and driven back to the cross every day. In turn, others may be drawn to the Savior we cling to as we learn to love the way Jesus is calling us to love. We don't know what the future holds, but I have been learning that living an authentic life of discipleship means living in the present as I walk in His presence. There is a temptation to dwell on past mistakes or worry about the future. It's uncomfortable living in the tension of not knowing what comes next, but having confidence that God will faithfully reveal what I need to know when I need to know it. It's a moment-by-moment exercise of trusting God through the pain, in the loss & when I am tempted to lose all hope in the circumstances of my life instead of resting in His presence. I am also learning that loving well means spending intentional time (both quality and quantity are important), being present, listening, listening some more, asking questions in an effort to understand, thinking the best about someone instead of presuming the worst & sacrificing my own self-interest. It is only possible to practice this kind of agape love if I spend significant time sitting with the Lord, listening, waiting, resting and receiving from Him so I can give of myself to others out of the overflow of what He has poured into me.

Here's how you can pray for us:

- Pray for unity amongst our team.
- Pray that we will be responsive and learn what God wants us to learn in this difficult season.
- Pray that God will continue to humble us.
- Pray that God will continue to guide and direct J.J.'s, Alex's and Dylan's paths & give them an ever-deepening desire to follow Him.
- Pray for God to direct our steps as we seek Him and desire to love those around us. Pray for relational connections with neighbors, co-workers and new friends.

## Bob's Voice

I have not previously contributed directly to any SoIL updates. That's to my shame, and to the detriment of transparency, honesty, and responsibility toward those who may rely upon knowing our status and ways that you may be in prayer for us. I apologize for that. At this point in our journey, we have all acknowledged that our individual perspectives may be helpful in others' understanding our current situation - through our varying lenses. If we are unwilling to share our burdens, failures and sufferings, how can we promote authenticity with others - both to those who are praying for us and those to whom we desire to minister? So, here it is - my raw synopsis.

We are currently in a time of team turmoil. If I'm being honest, that's a hard thing to admit, and it has been a difficult path leading to this place. It has been many months now since things seem to have been unraveling. Throughout that time, there has been an increasing awareness that we were charging forward, but perhaps in our own fleshly way. We came down to SoIL during a time of Covid dystopia, and I can now look back and recognize that we may have responded in a way that was not in alliance with God's leading. We were building, but we had no foundation. We had neglected to take seriously the deep work of teambuilding and development, but instead charged forward to try to be something that God had not led us to be - at least not yet. We had been trying to be a church, partially because Covid caused us to begin meeting before we were ready, but I also think partially out of arrogance that we were ready, even though we had ignored the vision that God had originally provided: a vision that left time for moving down and getting settled; for sitting quietly before Him; for seeking his direction in how to be a team; for building team relationships and considering the individual contributions to our team dynamic; for identifying the NEXT step that He was leading us to rather than the 12 steps between His leading and our charging ahead. Even when we began to realize that something wasn't right - rather than stopping, listening and waiting, there seemed to be a need to communicate a positive perception to those watching us - perhaps a reaction to cognitive dissonance, communicating a proactive approach and direction that laid out the next plan for fixing the problems. But all of the reacting, planning, façade-building, was all but filthy rags in the absence of humility, seeking God's face, and asking Him to bring us back into His light, so that we can see the path that He wants us to follow. Not running on ahead, like an impatient child wanting to get to the destination, and in so doing running ahead of His lighted path, but, instead, stepping WITH Him, allowing Him to be alongside us, allowing ourselves the comfort of His love and the peace of His being. I fear that anyone who has been watching our progress has been deceived. Instead of communicating how wonderful everything was, or present our circumstances in a positive/hopeful light, we should have been raw, truthful, even vulnerable, that things have not been going well - at all. I think we are beginning to be in a good place in that we have identified the folly of our efforts to work hard to accomplish God's goals, and have realized that we should be still, be open-handed with this ministry effort, and NOT focus upon the achievements that we can make on God's behalf. We should bear our cross, but it seems easier to take up His yoke; we should listen and respond, but it seems easier to charge ahead and accomplish good things for God; we should be in-step with Him and not ahead of Him - with no "but".

I hope that we've all come to a fully humble place before our LORD, so that there is hope for the future of our team ministry. I hope that I've come to a fully humble place before MY LORD so that I may be led by Him. Only through intense prayer and humility might these things be possible, and only by God's grace may we truly be of service to His call. I echo all of Michele's prayers above, and add a request for my own growth, humility and grace. I desire to be moldable to God's will and not stuck in my own. Any of you who know me know that I can tend to have a gruff exterior, and that is often perceived by others (I am told) as angry, passive-aggressive, or even self-sufficient. Those of you to whom I've been more vulnerable know me to be a man after God's heart, and someone that may be afraid or discouraged in my personal failures in the humility necessary to be a good and faithful servant. As I look back on our time here, so far, I can see evidence that being daily, on my knees, and seeking God for what is NEXT is the ONLY viable path forward. Thank you for reading this, for caring about our team ministry efforts, and for your prayer for me and us.

## Faith's Voice

With my update, I'm not really sure where to start. God's been doing such a deep work in me since the beginning of 2021 (which was my favorite year in the Lord thus far). But it was one of the hardest years for Jeff in about a decade. And, I was rather chipper and cheerful through it all (even when the Nenn's left, even when my mom died, even when Jeff was hurting, even when my ministry partners were hurting). I'm learning that's not healthy ... and God's been teaching me a lot in all of this.

The Lord wants me to slow down (ruthlessly eliminate hurry from my life) and to allow myself to feel pain—either my own or others'. The sanctification process for both Jeff and I in this has been difficult. We're both hurting, but I didn't realize I was until recently. We're both aware that all of the barriers God has put in front of us have come from Him. He's using them to reveal our ugly idols, self-protective strategies and self-sufficiency. We sense that this is a long, slow, painful process that we must continue to yield to. But I can see the beauty in what God is doing, and when we fix our gaze upon Him, we feel incredibly comforted that He would love us enough to pursue our hearts like this. Of course, when we focus on our suffering we feel angry and sad. So, looking up!

Jeff and I have both been reading books that talk about caring for the soul. Actually, God is teaching us both similar lessons this year about slowing down, about what's really motivating us, and to focus more on people than on tasks. I'm learning to just sit with Jesus instead of "work" my quiet time through ambitious Bible study and intercession. My sensitivity to His Spirit seems to be increasing, as I've had more to repent of and confess to God in the past several months than all of the years prior combined. And God continues to take me to our secret place together, where He is re-parenting me and showing me His unforced rhythms of grace.

There has been relational growth too. We've been challenged and are learning not to assume things about what others are thinking, their motives, ...etc. It really helps! Keeping short accounts really helps, too! Confession of sin to each other has been occurring more than it used to. Understanding how we each communicate and which type of communication is valued by the other was a big revelation for me recently. Michele and I have been having very deep talk times together and I'm so grateful for her pursuit of me, her wisdom, and her commitment to helping me grow. She's a sound voice to slow down, commit less, consider getting counseling, and learn to just be with people without an agenda. I wish I had more time with Kayla ... because she is a true gem. She helps us navigate difficult team conversations and is such an encourager. In truth, she's a lifesaver! I don't know how long we have her for, but I'm so glad to have this time with her. But despite all of this relational progress, our men are really struggling to work together. I think we need help to move forward. You can pray for us about this.

We know we need help and rest in all this. Jeff began seeing a therapist weekly, and that is good. I start therapy myself in April. I'm also cutting back for the month of April from many of my commitments (because I have made too many) so that I can sit in solitude and meditation and wait on the Lord. Jeff recently was at a lake house for a retreat of sorts with some pastors from our new church, and he has a men's Wild at Heart retreat in April. In early April I get to go spend a week with my family in VA for the first time since my mom died last March. That will be restful for me. I plan to hike mountains and play with my nieces and nephews and laugh at my Dad's corny jokes and celebrate my sister's 40th birthday and eat my brother's delicious cooking. I also have a pastor's wives retreat that I help plan/ lead at the end of April at Nest & Sparrow in central Missouri where I've gone to receive soul care. It's a magical place because the Lord always moves in tender ways there.

We are also getting to know more people at our new church, Wellspring Family Church in St. Louis. They're an EFCA church where several of our pastor friends attend. John recently went on their youth group winter retreat, committed his life to Christ, and got baptized at our new church by Jeff just this month. Praise God for His persistent pursuit of us!

## In Closing

*For all these things, we kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named. We pray that He may grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power in your inner being through His Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. We pray that you, being rooted and firmly established in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the length and width, height and depth of God's love, and to know Christ's love that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us—to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

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