**Interview 010 Pseudonym: Ainsley**

*I had to remove the professional details from this to preserve anonymity.*

INTERVIEWER: Can you confirm for me that you’ve read the information that I sent and that you’re happy to go ahead with this interview?

AINSLEY: Yeah, I read the emails that you sent me and happy to go ahead today.

INTERVIEWER: Just to start with, can you tell me about your faith history?

AINSLEY: So I became a Christian when I was 21. I was in my 3rd year at university. I remember going along to an Alpha maybe a year before I started going along to a local church accompanied by a couple of friends. And er, yeah, over maybe the space of a month or so getting to know the people at church and what the beliefs were there.

INTERVIEWER: What prompted that? Why did you go to Alpha and start going to church?

AINSLEY: mmm. I went to Alpha because there was free food there. And I, I, I felt pretty bored at home so it was just another thing to kind of fit into my day before going home. And em, I, Alpha kind of came and went. It was quite a while before I became a Christian. But the friendships that I’d made through the Alpha course were probably the main kind of things that then stirred me to enquire deeper into my faith. And that was at a time of crisis for me I suppose. It was when my er then fiancée and I were kind of splitting up and I needed to stay somewhere else whilst I was figuring out what to do with my house. So I moved in with one of the Christian friends who I’d got to know from the Alpha course. It was through that time that I kind of had a lot more, em, opportunity to ask questions and get to know his beliefs, and felt they were the right ones for me also.

INTERVIEWER: Interesting. So how did you get from there to where you are now?

AINSLEY: I suppose I just took it all quite seriously and thought, you know, at the time as a student, em, in [church network] it seemed as though if you were devoted to God and were serious about the way that you would use your life for him in your devotion, that there would be some purpose, some mission, and it seemed, em, it seemed worth the conversation with my then girlfriend when we were talking about what we might use our marriage for as we kind of pursued that later on in our lives, what that might become. And er, we were at [event name] which was the young demographics together at a leaders’ conference in [UK city]. We’d heard about church-planting and I just thought that’s what you would do if you were kind of – felt like you wanted to get caught up in adventure and purpose with God, I suppose. So started asking questions at that point and started praying into opportunities for that, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: So where did it go from there? Tell me the story.

AINSLEY: From there, I suppose that was many years ago now. It kind of, it evolved very, very steadily. Over the space of a few years I got married first and foremost, and the conversations that we were having throughout our engagement were around our interest in [country], primarily because I had a [country] academic friend, a guy that I studied with. And before I was a Christian ended up visiting there. And I suppose after becoming a Christian I kind of, again, like in this very kind of simple attitude of ‘if you’re a Christian you’re kind of following God then there’s a purpose that you’d devote yourself to.’ In the same sense of, OK, well if it’s church-planting, then which country do you know of that has any need? I was aware of the mental-health, high mental-health rates, and high suicide rates, and some of the kind of cultural challenges that [country-ans] face and thought, if there isn’t already a [church network] church in [country] then that would be something to consider. And this ended up being half joke, half serious conversation for many years between me and my fiancée at that point. And we had it once with our church leader, who was wondering why on earth we were going to [country] on our honeymoon. At the point we explained that that was where we were going and why, he was scratching his head about the fact that we might want to get to know his friends who were coming to re-join the church with the intentions of preparing to go to [same country] to church-plant. And so we took his advice and, em, that was ten years ago that we made friends with [names] who lead the church here now. And after five – four or five – years, at that point they moved out here, which was now about seven years ago. And left us behind in England. But we were very kind of exhilarated by the move at that point and decided that we would very much like to start ourselves into that. It took us another couple of years to, to, get our affairs in order and build up faith that we required to be able to do that. We didn’t find jobs beforehand, which was one of the big faith steps that we felt we ought to have had before we moved. And er, because we didn’t it just took another re-assessment of our faith to make that choice. And at the point that we did, we just had a car full of our stuff and er, and a couple of meetings lined up for when we arrived that potentially we might be able to find some work when we got here. And within a week of us arriving – it’s now nearly five years ago – my wife [name] found some work and just happened to be the kind of job that she was really hoping to find so it very much seemed like we were no longer tourists and that we could reside here and that kind of really sling-shotted us into feeling kind of very rooted here and settled in the church culture as well.

INTERVIEWER: Have there been times when your faith has been challenged, tested?

AINSLEY: I suppose there’s… There are a range and it depends what you would qualify as a challenge of your faith. There are the kind of everyday challenges that you come across culturally, environmentally, so [country] just being very different from the UK poses its own perks and benefits but also challenges as well. You know, so it probably goes on a sliding scale from missing bacon through to, you know, tragically missing out on some really kind of significant moments that you would hope to share with people that you love, I suppose. Not seeing your friends’ babies being born and, er, not being able to go to funerals because – of your dear friends – because you can’t just drop everything to turn up to those types of things. So, those have been things that I think challenged or at least forged faith, because it does create a lot of endurance and character through those things. And I’d say that they are challenges but, I would say that they are something that kind of builds resilience in your faith at the same time. Erm, other elements might be more associated with, with, perhaps the role that I might have as, as a church leader as well. Which may not be novel to being in a church-planting context but I think being, probably adding the burdens of church leadership with the isolation of not necessarily having a circuit of friends that you remember growing up with, that you feel that there is a kind of a deep connection with at that level. You’re basically starting to build a whole circuit of those types of support and friends in a new area, and that does kind of challenge your faith… because ultimately your dependency in God is often reassured and bolstered through, em, those that you’ve been invested in, discipled by, and friends with. So that can be, that can be a real challenge because again, on that level, there is also the divide as to how much other people can relate to your context as well. So one of the challenges is that even when I do get time to be supported – and people back home are very encouraging and very supportive – but they’re very much associated with the life that I was living when I was a student alongside them or a young professional alongside them in a context that was very familiar to us all. And they, a lot of those people can appreciate how my life might have changed since moving away. But because they’re not living and immersed in that then that does create some differences, I think, between their understanding at least of how they relate and how perhaps they can support. So I think that probably adds to a degree of loneliness that I can describe or observe. But, um, equally it’s something that I feel is a, it’s a blessing that there are still people who still want to invest in us. Ultimately when they… you know most people probably have moved on in their lives and forgotten about us at many levels. But a lot of key friends have continued to invest in their friendship over the distance, which is hard work.

Most recently my wife’s father died and that, that was a tragic event. Certainly kind of shook our faith, at least in our dependency in God. It kind of, it did definitely provide a whole fresh level of dependency that we required from God. And um, I think that was made all the more threatening for us in the fact that we couldn’t just drive to a dead parent and look after [wife’s name]’s mum. We just couldn’t do that. We had to kind of book flights and all of this stuff. So that was, that was certainly a whole host of threat there that we hadn’t really appreciated a great deal, I don’t think. We weren’t… it was quite sudden. Although my wife has older parents, it wasn’t something we’d spent a great deal of time reflecting on. Like, ‘so you live in a different country: what’s going to be the consequences, when your parents die, of living that far away from your parents?’ And then also you add the fact that you, as a result of the pandemic, you can’t attend the cremation. You know, you can’t go … when your country’s borders are shut and you can’t actually leave your country to go back. There’s all kinds of extra things that definitely changed our faith, I think, significantly. Yeah, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Challenging times.

AINSLEY: Mmm. Big time.

INTERVIEWER: So how have you found living in a different culture?

AINSLEY: I think that …. The over-arching response is that we – I – have enjoyed it, I’ve embraced it. Really life-giving. I feel like it’s added a whole level of awareness to myself as an individual. A whole level of appreciation about the world outside of England. I didn’t consider myself massively prejudiced or close-minded, but I realise that we must all be on a spectrum of understanding and prejudices because I, my eyes were opened as to how I thought things were done, or I … you know… How I believed countries were and stuff. And all of those things become challenged when I moved into an environment where I kind of had to learn a whole host of extra things. Not just the language, but, um, kind of social dynamics and, um, simple things like administrative processes, you know, and the ways that people might signpost you through those things: filling out a form or asking about how a form might be filled in, it’s a very different process from what it would be in England. Not necessarily better or worse but, em, it’s something that you just have to discover. And a lot of that can be quite, em, exhausting, because you’re just - I ended up just having to just learn a great deal. And, and, and admit vulnerability over a lot of stuff that probably I just felt very secure in knowing what ingredients were when I walked into a … you know, what things were called, how much they cost when you walk into a shop. Or what even certain social cues might mean, when someone behaves in a certain way. And not really knowing what they meant or what they said, even if it was in English. And then of course I think that culturally in [country] there’s a lot associated with the environment that you’re in as well: so everything’s very seasonal and so there’s a massive kind of learning curve that I went through just coping with the different seasons, which are all very extreme. Extremely kind of definitive. Whereas in the UK it’s all pretty much either cloudy and raining or it’s sunny and … raining… Yeah. There’s kind of like, there’s really four kind of defined seasons and you have to really embrace them if you’re actually going to survive the year through. So, if you’re not outside enjoying the long kind of daylight hours when it’s sunny, then you are really going to miss it when it’s really dark in the winter. And if you’re not up for kind of getting out into the cold and enjoying the snow when it’s winter, then you’re going to spend a lot of time indoors, probably feeling quite lonely. So, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me who you think have been models in your faith?

AINSLEY: Who would be models in my faith?

INTERVIEWER: yeah

AINSLEY: yeah, yeah. So, erm, probably very early on I’d describe these peers and friends that introduced me to my faith, I think definitely at that point I admired their, their, their faith in the Lord and I kind of, I felt led and kind of eager to kind of draw alongside them to, to em, to kind of learn but grow in ways in which their character seemed to be something that I admired, and I suppose just something about the intimacy with the presence of God was just something that really fascinated me in others as well. So definitely my peers as a young student. I never really got too excited about, um, kind of the celebrity leaders that a lot of other peers would be reading about and hearing about. I remember at the time, I think it was Mark Driscoll that was very, very kind of prominent. I never really, I don’t know why, I never really was… I can’t remember names of people in books and stuff like that. So it’s all very simple for me.

My wife is largely responsible for, I think, one of my big examples in faith. She’s modelled a very admirable faith from a very young age and I suppose something… having been introduced to Christianity at kind of an adult age I suppose I admired something of the innocence that came with growing up in that environment at a very young age.

Then I think, beyond that and more contemporary figures for me and role models in faith have been the apostolic leaders within [sub-network of UK church network]. So, I would say that [name] has been like a really prominent kind of at times father-figure, but I think largely just inspirational overseer and a man that’s been able to not only just kind of ascribe massive amounts of trust and vision to people that seem like completely unsuspecting like myself, but then also kind of connect the dots and actually kind of apply patience and long-standing strategy and experience and insight and wisdom. I think, you know, he’s definitely been a fantastic figure for faith. Recently he’s been, um, been marvellous. He visited during last summer and we were just really – I was really impressed by what seems to be like the next level of faith that he possesses for, for simply standing in very, very kind of firmly on top of what he sees as the vision for Europe and really kind of communicating his determination at least to live that through and devote his life to see that happen. I remember him saying that – I’m sure he’s said it probably in many other contexts than when he was with us – that he believes that in God he is unstoppable [laugh]. It’s just a … you know, I think from anyone else it would be quite bombastic to say it, but I think when you see the sheer, em, when you actually see the fact that, the grace on the man, see the… I do believe that that’s completely true and remarkable too… to ultimately lead alongside and kind of know him as a friend.

INTERVIEWER: So tell me about where you’re living and what you’re doing?

AINSLEY: So I live in a flat in central [city]. It’s a very kind of flat-orientated part of the city and we live in a kind of quiet borough perhaps of [city]. [City] is very small for it to really have that many different parts of it. But we live in, I suppose, the design district of [city]. I currently, em, sit indoors a lot, there isn’t much work to do.

INTERVIEWER: Don’t we all?

AINSLEY: But when I’m not in the middle of a pandemic, I’ve been, I’ve been part of the [detail omitted] industry. It’s … That’s freelance work and it’s been a very … whereas my wife has arrived and found a job within a week and is still in that job. They’re having talks about temporary lay-offs at the moment but her job’s still very much safe. I’ve had a number of different jobs. I was a [professional role] in England, after having got a [detail omitted] degree. And then I, em, I became a [detail omitted] three years before I left England. And I did a number of different jobs having moved here. And em, going back to some of the challenges, I’d say that that’s probably one of the other kind of foundational kind of faith-shaking kind of moments. I’d just had to kind of resiliently pull through kind of changing career a number of times, just in face of primarily wanting to devote a lot of time to the church. It – not necessarily always being clear what that even would look like as a particular role because it isn’t very clear to develop a church from grassroots. If you’re expecting to kind of have a particular job or something like that, it’s very, very hard to pin down. So, em, but then also wanting job satisfaction in other areas. So I set up a small [detail omitted] firm for a short while it was really quite successful but ran into a few complications with my partners and sold that up. That was a strange episode which was quite stressful and certainly got me asking a lot of faith questions at that point. But em, currently now I feel very kind of comfortable with the balance of freelancing with the [work] and then kind of offering kind of like a volunteer role for church-related tasks. That can range from anything from doing some light admin stuff – I’m not very good at that so I try to avoid it – kind of pastorally meeting up with folk in town and then preparing teachings and, em, encouraging others to, yeah, live a life with the Lord I suppose. Reaching out to others and building good friendships. Serving.

INTERVIEWER: So do you consider yourself a missionary? And how would you define that?

AINSLEY: People call us that. Especially those that aren’t from [UK church network] and… and I’ve got no qualms with that. I probably was quite surprised to hear that the first time I heard it. I can’t remember who it was. But anyway it was the kind of social context where someone says, ‘ah, so you’re a missionary….’ I wasn’t in a position where I felt like I needed to contradict them. I felt like, ‘yes! Why not?’ I don’t know whether I call myself that first and foremost, but em… what was the question exactly?

INTERVIEWER: Would you call yourself a missionary and how would you define ‘missionary’?

AINSLEY: Right, right. I suppose I would define a ‘missionary’ as someone who seems to have been, em, who would have been perhaps sent into a particular vocation or field that, em, was, had an ongoing line of support and it, it… from what I have understood – and I’m very open to this being fairly short-sighted perspective, but from what I have understood one of the key components that support would take would be financial, kind of ongoing financial support. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: So how are you supported? Obviously you said your wife’s working… but I mean both the financial but also the practical things, prayer, that kind of thing…

AINSLEY: Yeah, so, we’re supported through a couple of key relationships, I suppose. That would be the way that I would look at it. Financially we’re almost entirely independent. Certainly we don’t get any money from anyone. But there might be one other family that perhaps gets money from a few people, maybe sent occasionally from church. Now it tends to be that that’s… if there are any donations it tends to be coming directly into the church plant accounting. But, aside from that, there are relationships that I started to talk about. Our sending church: so the two families that came out here initially, my family and [names], they both came from the church in [UK city]. And so the relationship that we’ve had with that church is, is something that’s probably developing in, throughout the years. It’s certainly not been something that has been a fervent lifeline all the way along. There’s key friendships that we have with people that are our friends in that church. And I would say that they… the form of support that we get from those is, em, is occasional chances to talk and be comforted by our friends, and prayer. Recently when we shared our bereavement, we did actually get a care package from some of our friends in [city] actually, with a few nice gifts inside. But the friendships… the relationship with the leadership from [sending church] mainly revolves around the lead elder at [city]. There’s … and then there’s just a couple of other key leaders that are kind of … [name] used to be an elder at [city] but he now is a leader of a church-plant, and he’s also a key, so a fellow church-planter is another key lifeline for us and support. And em, as I say [leader mentioned earlier] and a couple of other of his peers that are kind of apostolically involved in a few other churches are also kind of relationships that we would kind of lean on. And the kind of support that we would get from them is very often, em, kind of advice and apostolic kind of leading in quandaries that we might have, questions that we would raise, directions when it would come to kind of doctrinal decisions. Or seasonal kind of decisions for the life of the church perhaps as well. Particular challenges that we might face pastorally with people in the church, seeking advice and prayer support and sometimes practical support as well. So it might be that these kind of people that I mentioned, took my time to talk about those three different people, they would probably all be hands-on in wanting to either come out here to kind of deliver particular types of teaching or send other people, be involved in sending other people to be involved in either delivering teaching… Quite often teaching is not necessarily what is most helpful for us as a small group of people that ultimately [are] hoping to just build on, on em, simple values as a church family. Defining a lot of these basic and foundational things often revolves around some of the immediate needs that people have relationally in just getting to know us. Maybe whatever their kind of struggling with at the time, that kind of maybe, especially with the demographic that we find that we attract – it’s often people between churches that maybe have their own problems that they bear against the types of ideas that they might perceive with churches. And that’s certainly a prominent demographic we seem to have gathered. And so, yeah, often it’s a case of actually just coming out here to be friends and have dinner with us and reassure us through good relationship and encouragement in supporting with simple things, like just facilitating conversation, picking up conversation even from back in the UK with others as well. So if someone’s got a particular prophetic gift for example, whereas as a church we may not be able to facilitate a whole kind of growth and line of progression for someone’s gifting, if we’re primarily focussing on just kind of growing a community of generosity for example, there is actually a relationship that they can feed off of outside of our context – immediate context. They could be kind of lean into and be encouraged in their prophetic gift from someone else who has that experience and wisdom.

INTERVIEWER: How do you go about taking major decisions?

AINSLEY: Mainly based on how much capacity we’ve got. Most decisions really revolve around how much money’s in the bank and not literally – how exhausted are we, how many other jobs do we have on at the moment. Yeah, literally who is going to do it is one of the biggest questions that we end up coming back to quite often. Which is frustrating because it often means that we feel quite reactive in the way that we kind of operate. I, for one, have most recently been frustrated that if your decisions are primarily just reactive as a community, but equally as a Christian, like are you kind of able to kind of consider some of the more provocative and higher callings and questions that God’s really posing to you? When it revolves around the people of God, a community, that’s often some of the big purposes that the church serves that you’d much prefer to be paying attention to, em… And so I suppose one of the reasons then that we do kind of come back to capacity being one of the big questions is that we do wish to prioritise that, that higher order. And so if we’re too exhausted, then quite often what happens is that we just don’t end up getting round to that that question of why are we not finding time to meet people during the week that aren’t part of church, for example, which is a classic question. One that you end up kind of asking yourself if you’re spending most of your time trying to organise stuff.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have a plan for the future? [pause] How long do you think you’re staying?

AINSLEY: OK. We… don’t have a plan for how long we would stay. Initially we had said we’ll review it after three years. So that was our first, our first decision. And after three years we realised very quickly within that three years that nothing much is going to happen within such a short window of time. And we’re very much aware that even one’s calling, one’s life takes quite a significant time to unfold. So I think we’re, em, we’re not planning in any way to move on. I suppose that’s often what we do get asked. And see very much that our lives are kind of here, and here for the long haul. In terms of other areas of planning, is there something that you are interested in in particular?

INTERVIEWER: Well that’s interesting what you said! Do you have children?

AINSLEY: No. I think in terms of planning as a wider bracket, we’ve probably as a family not been that great at planning things beyond the immediate attention. So we’ve probably thrown ourselves into contexts and scenarios which we’ve found, em, effervescent or attractive, and we’ve seen that there’s great potential for God to kind of be glorified through certain things and we’ve wanted to kind of throw ourselves into those. And I wonder whether it’s just a character-based thing that… not so uncommon but seems to have become more so as we’ve matured in years… that we haven’t made kind of particular plans around family planning, or particular plans around however many years it might take for us to establish a church or, you know, do particular things. But I think that’s largely just down to our character more than anything else.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about your experience of working in team?

AINSLEY: Erm… It’s certainly something that I’ve probably got more appreciation for now than ever. When I first moved out here my kind of overarching message was that doing, doing the thing that God’s called you to do closely with the people that you love the most is probably the best thing that you could ever spend your life doing. And I still believe that very strongly. But I suppose what I’ve discovered about team has been very nuanced by the transition that I’ve gone through as a very young student finding a faith but not necessarily applying it in a way that seemed very conventional for a lot of my peers that were kind of scholarly and able to attract a lot of what I saw as the conventional disciplers, that you kind of have your role as a small group leader. I suppose I didn’t really fit a certain mould that I perceived and realised that more recently that that’s probably just a chip on my shoulder that I carried with me, but I realised that my shape within team was something that I needed to definitely understand what my role was and my purpose was that God actually was telling me to do and commissioning me for. And have a boldness and courageousness about that for a long time I don’t feel I had. And I suppose one thing I can appreciate now is that a lot of roles that exist within team can only really exist if there is an appointment by God and that people are convinced that that is true, that they are actually willing to serve within that role. I think if those two ingredients aren’t there, em, I don’t think there’s much synergy for team to really happen. I think you’ll just get one person that is probably a very good leader and a lot of people that think that actually that leader’s great, but are there mainly to think that they are to support that person and help that person to achieve what God’s calling them to do. But probably won’t be immersed into the calling themselves, em, and probably when push comes to shove there won’t actually be an immersive kind of thing that pulls them into that sharing that purpose together. It may have probably a lot of – well I’ve seen it has a lot of of, er, negative repercussions in the form of disillusionment and, er, and a short capacity for staying the long-haul basically.

INTERVIEWER: Have you seen a lot of that happening?

AINSLEY: Yep. I wonder if it’s … I’ve been talking with a few other people more recently, em, because I’d say that we’ve had a season of it where we’ve – for whatever reason – we’ve had a flurry of it maybe within the last year, eighteen months. Where a real handful of people have for reasons that I’m fully kind of happy to respect and feel that, you know, we’re all at peace at sending people well and not wanting to feel as though that was for whatever reason that they weren’t able to stay in the context of this kind of mission field or church plant context. But for whatever reason, yeah, there have been a lot of kind of, em, a few people that have just struggled to really kind of embrace the full kind of amount of costs and sacrifice that it really took for, for, or really would take for you to kind of stay for longer than perhaps a year or two. I wonder whether this kind of country, this type of church community, might be a bit of an incubator for bringing those things out in people whereas they may not kind of manifest as quickly if there weren’t the pressures of language barrier, dark winters, and strange food and social awkwardness that comes with being in [country].

INTERVIEWER: yeah. Interesting. I think I’ve covered most things here! How and how much do you use social media?

AINSLEY: Not at all. I used to do it as a bit of a business type thing. Cause I was, I was, I owned a company as I mentioned earlier and felt that that was a good way to promote the company. I don’t really, although I have social media accounts, I don’t really use them on a personal level. I do sometimes, because I’m a… I do create video. I end up doing some of that for church. So sometimes end up managing the account for some of those posts, for the actual church account. But that tends to be something that I’m not very skilled at and try to avoid. But that tends to often mean that doesn’t get done. [laugh]. So it’s something that I’m currently… I’m currently writing a social media, em, strategy for our church-plant. I’m definitely not the best person for the job, but… That’s… I’m pretty much at arms-length with social media. Very, very challenging document for me to write.

INTERVIEWER: yeah, yeah. So how are you dealing with the lockdown?

AINSLEY: you mean without social media?

INTERVIEWER: well yes, I suppose! But I was thinking the church…. But yeah, yourself staying in touch.

AINSLEY: yeah with church life we have made use of Zoom as a main way of keeping in touch. That takes its shape with what maybe even looks like a fairly conventional meeting without it kind of being face to face. With the church group size that we have, roughly 25-30 people, it’s not at all an issue to manage a group of that size with that platform. And so you do actually get quite a lot of interaction and it’s a really … we’ve been testing it and developing it over the last couple of weeks and feel that it’s a good fit for us. And hope that it’s going to be an attractive kind of signpost for people if it was that social media was successfully used for that that perhaps other people that were looking to find a church during this time, or find out what churches are doing, this would actually be quite an attractive means of getting involved with that. There are a few people that are visiting one another. Or dropping food round to each other, where certain people – us included – have been going through some challenges. There are a couple of new babies in the church, so that’s kind of practically what’s been done to help them out a bit. Em… and… that’s probably it. Whatsapp is one big thing we use a lot as well, to keep each other updated, prayer requests and things to celebrate through there, messaging throughout the week. Yep.

INTERVIEWER: So are you keeping in touch with people back in the UK as well?

AINSLEY: Mainly through Whatsapp. It’s seems that… it’s funny… a lot of people have come out of the woodwork with using the video calling. It’s been something that we’ve done with relatives of course for a long time. It’s interesting that now that people are sitting at home bored, and they probably use Skype and whatever else for work, that they kind of thought, oh, we can see how they’re doing on that. Yeah. Using a bit of video calling and, er, a few phonecalls and stuff like that, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: OK, great. Well thank you, thank you for your time. And stay safe.

AINSLEY: We’ll do our best, and you too!