

Thaddeus Fennig | RH Church Planter

MY STORY

I was born in Indiana in 1983. By the time I was a year old, we moved to south Alabama. I am the youngest of four siblings, all of which are married with kids. It's awesome having four nephews and three nieces, but a little overwhelming at times, too! My dad is a lifelong pastor. He initially was involved in Youth for Christ in Indiana and then Alabama. When we moved to Orange Beach, Alabama in 1989, he became the senior pastor of a local congregation where he has presided since. My mom has worked a variety of jobs and would say she went to college just to meet my dad. She's currently her own boss; she owns a consignment shop in Foley, AL. My mom and dad have been married more than forty years! After high school, I attended college at Taylor University in Indiana, where I earned a Bachelor's of Science in Social Studies Education. I moved to California in the summer of 2008 to join some college friends who graduated early (or maybe I graduated late...).



OUR STORY

Kristen and I met playing beach volleyball during the summer of 2009. Up until I met her, I was unwilling to follow a call on my life to become a pastor even though friends and family had encouraged me to go to seminary or seek a career in ministry. It made sense; my dad has been the pastor of a church for over 20 years, and my grandfather before him. When Kristen and I began having a conversation about the rest of our lives, the direction seemed to point to pastoral ministry.

We were married July 25th the following year, and soon got involved in a local church, Mariners Mission Viejo. I told Kristen I felt called toward ministry and she encouraged me to follow that calling. Within a few months, I was the Junior High pastor. Looking back, even now, I am baffled that the church leadership trusted me enough to put me in charge of that ministry (we had only been attending for a few months). That was one of the first clear, external affirmations I received for my pastoral call. I held that position until we entered a sermon series on Ephesians. A theme of Ephesians is 'becoming the people you already are'. The first three chapters are all identifiers of true believers. The last three are all commands based on the first three chapters. Simply, you are all these things (1-3), so do the following (4-6). The focus was on a life of community; we felt our community was divided — part in Mission Viejo with church, and part in Huntington

Beach with our friends. One weekend in particular we felt God calling us to leave Mission Viejo and find a church community in Huntington Beach.

In the summer of 2011, we began checking out different churches and stumbled into **ROCKHARBOR** Huntington Beach. We knew a few people there, especially Brock and Deanna Snook—they were our marriage mentors. Our first weekend at the **ROCKHARBOR** Campus, Kristen and I began praying that we'd have some clarity about where we should be planted. We were still unsure we were making the right decision leaving Mariners. We hoped that God would give us some form of affirmation. Kristen and I really enjoyed the marriage ministry at Mariners and prayed that God would lead us to a church with a Young Married ministry. When we walked in to RHHB that Sunday, Deanna Snook saw us, welcomed us with a hug, and a comment, "You're thinking about coming here? You have to. We need a Young Married ministry and you should help us start it." We obeyed Deanna (and the Holy Spirit) and began attending **ROCKHARBOR** Huntington Beach.

I became plugged in right away through the work of the Holy Spirit in my wife. She loves to chat to everyone, and I don't. She began networking with people in the church and met a lot of people our first few weeks there. Along the way, someone mentioned to Kristen about a discipleship group Andrew (the **ROCKHARBOR** Huntington Beach Campus Pastor) was starting. Kristen encouraged me to attend, I didn't really think much of it—I had a bible study with my friends, I didn't need another one! After finally showing up, Andrew explained it wouldn't just be a Bible study, but a discipleship group for people who felt a calling to be pastors and leaders in the church. This was a second clear, external calling. Through that group, I began becoming involved at the High School ministry. Andrew invited me to teach on my second week of volunteering and I pretty much nailed it (kidding). After a couple of months teaching and helping the awesome leadership at the High School group, Andrew approached me at one of our weekend services. He asked, "Do you want to preach next weekend?" I replied, "Sure," thinking he meant at High School group. He then said, "At the main service."

It's hard for me to put into words how that moment felt.

For about two years, I had slowly been leaning in the direction of pastoral ministry and preaching. Now I was being asked to preach—on Sunday morning ... in front of adults ... at a **ROCKHARBOR** Campus. Just a few years before this moment, I was attending **ROCKHARBOR** and blending in to the mass of bodies. Now I was preaching from the pulpit. It's still really incredible to look back on that invitation. I'm now part of our teaching team where I have the opportunity to preach on a semi-regular basis. Every time is a new experience. I am incredibly thankful for the vision Andrew had for us as well as our community's willingness to listen to my preaching.

How did we hear about the **ROCKHARBOR Residency?**

In the fall of 2012, Kristen and I were asked to become Community Pastors of our campus (it's a similar role as a deacon in more traditional churches). We met for a few weeks and through the classes learned about a variety of pastoral roles we could play.

Part of our commissioning as Community Pastors was an exit interview. At the exit interview, they asked us about the calling we felt on our lives.

Up until this point, I had been teaching at a local, private Christian high school. I thoroughly enjoyed my teaching position and loved being able to learn a ton about American History while spending hours each day positively influencing the upcoming generation. Oddly enough, since the summer of 2012, I had a feeling (clearly from the Holy Spirit) that the 2012-2013 school year may be my last year teaching there. I had accepted the teaching job in the fall of 2008. It had been an awesome place for me to learn patience, humility, hard work, and Christian fellowship. But for some reason, I felt in that summer the Holy Spirit clearly tell me it would be my last year there.

At our exit interview, I told our interviewer, Doug Berry, that I felt a pastoral calling on my life, that I really enjoyed my current job as a US History teacher, but felt that I was being called into ministry somewhere soon. He then informed me that he was leading a new program at **ROCKHARBOR**—the Church Planting Residency and it would begin September 2013. The primary purpose was to prepare those called into pastoral ministry to plant churches. It would be a full-time position that would consist of serving and leading at **ROCKHARBOR** Huntington Beach for half of my week, with the other half spent in front of local pastors, church planters, and other forms of pastoral and leadership training and development.

There are a few moments in my life when my heart has been throbbing—my wedding day, the birth of both of my children—this was another.

There was something about leading and planting a church, combined with the idea the Holy Spirit had put on my heart about leaving the school, and the timing of the Church Planting Residency that seemed too good to be true.

We began to pray about possibly entering the Residency in September. We sought wisdom from scripture, guidance from the Holy Spirit, and advice from friends and family. After various internal and external affirmations, we finally accepted the calling on our lives to become Church Planters through **ROCKHARBOR**.

Even in the midst of entering into this, we took a leap of faith for the interview. The formal interview for the Residency was scheduled for April 7, but Kristen and I felt that God wanted us to tell my school before the interview that I was planning on not returning the following year. The conversation with my administrator was encouraging and he complimented my role and influence as a teacher. It was encouraging to know I was leaving on a positive note! We interviewed that Sunday for about eight hours. Other than this being the longest interview I've ever been a part of, it was a good opportunity for me to chat with Doug Berry about my goals as a pastor, his goals as the director of the Residency program, and how the two fit together. This became another affirmation where we felt we were being obedient and stepping out in faith. God followed through assuaging any fears we had.

About the Residency

The Church Planting Residency at **ROCKHARBOR** is a developmental position created in order to prepare the resident to plant a church. Whereas a Masters of Divinity would hold high value, the RH Church Planting Residency differs in that its primary focus is on practical pastoral leadership. As a resident, my weekly schedule exhibited various developmental goals that gave me practical application for a church plant. The resident responsibilities included, theological training, teaching, preaching, and church leadership, job shadowing of divisions of the church (Operations, Finance, Worship, Families, etc.), and various forms of church planting training. Every resident is planted at one of **ROCKHARBOR's** campus churches to help lead and facilitate weekend worship services (I was at **ROCKHARBOR** Huntington Beach).

Part of the Residency was identifying a location for the plant. In May of 2014, we identified five cities to visit and pray for. We dedicated four months to seek God's guidance and voice as it pertained to us planting in one of those five cities. We chose Huntington Beach, California; Westminster, California; Seal Beach, California; Tampa, Florida; and Charlotte, North Carolina.

Each month we gathered with people from our community and prayed for clarity from God as to where we should plant. We also asked our family and friends across the country to pray for us. A specific prayer we asked people to pray for us was that God would place a love for the city He wanted us to plant in.

We initially felt strongly about Seal Beach or Huntington Beach because we have a strong community and people from within had articulated a desire to help us plant and to be a part of our team. But after four months of prayer and visiting and coffee and journaling, we felt clearly that God had different plans for us. The easiest way to describe the change in our minds was that at the beginning of the four months we were sure we would end up in Orange County; by the end of the four months, we were sure we had to leave. We literally felt like we'd be disobedient if we stayed. Sort of like if you've ever been in a relationship you knew wasn't good for you, but you hung around too long—we actually started to view Orange County like that!

Since that moment (which was huge for us!) we've had countless forms of encouragement and affirmation about our decision to plant a church in Charlotte. We had been praying God would make us fall in love with the city He had for us. We were in love with Charlotte. At the end of the discernment period, we started telling people we were planting in Charlotte; we began praying that God would close the doors for Charlotte if we were not hearing Him correctly. Since our decision to plant in Charlotte had been public, we'd experienced nothing but support and encouragement from so many people—people within our own community that are continuing to support us financially as well as from churches and families in Charlotte who want to help us plant the church! It's honestly been one of the most joyful periods of our lives; we have received daily overwhelming blessings from various sources.

What's the Plan for Charlotte?

We are moving to Charlotte at the end of July 2015. We plan to arrive, get settled, and begin meeting with our Launch Team straight away. We are going with two other families from California, as well as a local Charlotte family who God has been working on to join our Launch Team. We'll spend the first month adjusting and acclimating ourselves to the weather and culture, spending time getting to know our team better, and then shortly after the transition, begin clarifying vision for the church plant, developing our Launch Team, and initiating missional communities in and around Charlotte.

Once we have enough momentum (people) we'll launch a weekly gathering (tentatively Spring 2016). As a church, we desire to live a life that is truly fulfilling. We desire to be known as a church planting church filled with disciple making disciples. This involves a re-defining of what a disciple is and why church planting is so important. We believe the impact of this church plant in Charlotte, throughout North Carolina, and along the East Coast is limitless.