



BONUS EPISODE

Boca Raton's Church Planting O.G.

The story behind the Acts 29 church planting network's origins.

SHOW NOTES

Contrary to Mars Hill lore, Mark Driscoll didn't plant his church alone. Though he prized the image of a solo, entrepreneurial pastor, Driscoll found early success thanks to two co-planters, a sending church, and a network of support. And 3,000 miles away in Boca Raton, Florida, the concept of the Acts 29 church network was already taking shape as an offshoot of the Spanish River Church Planting Network.

Church planting requires a certain audacity, and in the early 1970s, nobody had more than David Nicholas. Founder of Spanish River Church, David's burden for evangelism took shape in mentoring relationships with pastors starting congregations of their own. A planter himself, David empathized with those who felt lonely in that particular calling, and he sought to encourage and empower leaders by offering them community—a network in which they could receive the care, training, and accountability to do their jobs well.

In this episode of The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill, host Mike Cospers invites us into the room with David Nicholas and Mark Driscoll—two church planters with widely divergent visions for what constituted successful church growth. Tracing the Acts 29 network from its beginnings, Cospers asks whether any leadership potential is worth overlooking red flags, and whether the broader church actually has what it takes to mentor young leaders with issues of character.

MASTHEAD

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Mike Cospers: We have two episodes left in the story of the Rise and Fall of Mars Hill. But before we get there, we wanted to take this week to follow a rabbit trail that sheds some more light on the story, and that rabbit trail leads us to the founding of Acts 29, Mars Hill's church planting network.

Mark Driscoll: When I started the church, I really wish I would've had a network of guys that I could talk to. I had never been to a pastor's conference and I didn't know there were pastor's conferences. I wasn't in a... No seminary, no Bible college, no denomination, nothing. It's like, I'm gonna start a church. I've never even been a member of a church. I'm going to start one. So that's what I did. And I made all kinds of mistakes, and along the way, I really wished I would've had some guys to talk to, somebody to coach me. I had a guy, he was a coach - and he was helpful, I need to clarify that - but I wish I would've had a team of guys to talk to, a network of guys to work with, and just part of a tribe to belong to, we were an independent church.

And so fast forward, Mars Hill over the years had its highs and lows, and we started small. But God's been very gracious to us, and early on I started meeting a lot of guys traveling and speaking, who were planting churches or wanting to plant churches. And so started funding some of them, helping some of them, trying to coach some of them. I didn't even know what coaching was, so just trying to help. A lot of chicken wings and listening to them gripe and tell me how megachurches stunk, and they were gonna do it biblically. You know, church planting conversations. And so then we partnered, started Acts 29, and over the years God's been very gracious and generous to grow it.

So it's a real honor to be here with you. I'm gonna go ahead and pray. I'm gonna tell you just what Acts 29 is and where it's going. Not as much of a sermon.

Mike Cospers: There's a lot we could put under the microscope in this story. It's an example like others we've noted on the podcast, where the storytelling puts Driscoll at the center, an entrepreneurial leader going it alone in the world of church planting. But that's just not true. He didn't plant alone. He had a sending church, Antioch Bible, and he had two co-planters, Mike Gunn and Lief Moi.

He was also part of a cohort of Gen X pastors and church planters, and the Young Leaders Network, who were launching ministries all across the country. But most importantly, the gaping hole in this founding story is the absence of the guy who was really at the center of it, the one whose church provided the funding, the organization, and a host of other resources that made Acts 29 happen. A guy who came up with the name Acts 29 before he'd even met Mark Driscoll.



David Nicholas: If you are not a risk taker, you're not gonna be much of a church planter.

Mike Cospers: This audio is from an Acts 29 event in 2001, and that voice is David Nicholas, the pastor of Spanish River Church in Boca Raton, Florida. David planted Spanish River in 1967, and he'd been training, coaching, and sending church planters for decades by then. He was almost 70 when this was recorded.

David Nicholas: And again, you have to have common sense with this, and believe that

[@RickMcKinleypdx](#)

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God is leading you, but what we... What the planter does is take risks. Acts 29 was a huge risk for me, a huge risk for me. I am a denominational man, I belong to a Presbyterian church in America, I planted Presbyterian Church in America churches for years, and I decided that I wanted to do something different, to create a new entity that would plant churches, that would bring about a self... or a self-perpetuating movement, not dead end churches where we just put money into you, and that was the end of it. But that you were going to start putting money back in. That was a huge risk because I had no idea, and I've had a lot of questions since I did this as to whether I did the right thing, but I believed that God was in it and this is what I should do.

Rick McKinley: David, he was so funny. He was 6'6", thin guy. He was older, but, I mean, had a great head of hair, dressed very well.

Mike Cospers: This is Rick McKinley who you've heard from in earlier episodes. Like so many pastors, David had a significant impact on his life.

Rick McKinley: If I did imitation of him it would be like, These guys, they want to plant churches, but they don't preach the gospel. Rick, Boca was a great spot for him, he planted an amazing church.

Mike Cospers: By all accounts, he was a larger than life personality, a force to be reckoned with, which really isn't surprising given that church planting requires a certain kind of audacity. But for David, it wasn't just will or persona, it was a genuine passion to see the work get done, evidenced most clearly by his willingness to put his money where his mouth was.

Rick McKinley: I think for me, when you think of church planting, denominationally, people you talk to, they're like, Yeah, we'll help you, write a prayer letter and you can send it to your grandma and raise money. And here's a guy who 10% of their budget was going to church planting for years, and who is willing to put \$100,000, \$80,000, \$150,000 towards a church plant. And that was all David's brainchild and heart and passion.

Mike Cospers: Church planting is expensive, and that level of commitment from a single church is rare and unique. It relieves a burden of fundraising that might have required courting four or more churches to give, and it's a huge morale boost, a sense that someone's behind you in an extraordinary way. That boost was all the more potent when you knew David's legacy and the generations of church planters that he'd invested in before.

The church he planted became a megachurch, but he never became a celebrity pastor. In fact, one person close to him said they thought he knew it wouldn't be best for him. And while Acts 29 under Driscoll occasionally mentioned him, he was hardly a household name. Many in the network still have never heard of him. Even so, his legacy continues there and in other circles where the outcome of more than four decades of work is stunning.

Rick McKinley: So yeah, he was a pretty, extremely unique figure, kind of like a grandfather guy. He was pretty amazing.

Mike Cospers: From Christianity Today, this is Mike Cospers and you are listening to the Rise and Fall of Mars Hill. It's the story of one church that grew from a handful of people to a movement, and then collapsed almost overnight. It's a story about power, fame, and spiritual trauma, problems faced across the spectrum of churches in America.

And yet, it's also a story about the mystery of God working in broken places. On today's episode, Boca Raton's Church Planting OG.

Nori Nicholas: Oh, my goodness, we were in that world of church planting before church planting was cool. There was a space of time where church planting just wasn't done anymore.

Mike Cospers: This is Nori Nicholas, David Nicholas's widow.

Nori Nicholas: Just before he graduated, at the beginning of his very last semester, his wife left him and took their three children, his three sons. So he graduated with a brand new Master's of Divinity and a brand new decree of divorce. And with those two things in hand in 1963, to go find a job was like, Okay, it just didn't happen. His wife went to live with her boyfriend in Beaumont, Texas, and so he decided to look for a church as close to Beaumont as he possibly could get.

Mike Cospers: He found work at a church in Liberty, Mississippi, a tiny town of maybe 600 people surrounded by farmland at the Southwest corner of the state. It was while pastoring there that he met Nori.

Nori Nicholas: I was in a small Christian college up in Briarcliff Manor in New York. And one Christmas I ended up going home with my roommate for Christmas vacation, and she dragged me to a party. It was a very dull affair, it's hard to call it a party, but for college students that were home for Christmas. And these two guys who were obviously way past college stage came in there, trolling, looking for girls, and I was quite insulted by the whole thing, and he kind of attached himself to me, so I made myself very scarce. And he called me and asked me for a date, and I really wasn't going to go, but my girlfriend and her whole family were going out and I was going to be locked in the house for the whole evening by myself, so I ended up going out on a date with him and it was like we found soul mates. We went out and we went to a cafe and we sat there and started talking. And I had run into a lot of difficulties in my own life with my family and with theological difficulties, the same theological difficulties that he'd run into at Dallas Theological Seminary. And so we sat there and we talked and all of a sudden we realized not only were we the only people in the cafe, but every other chair had its legs pointing at the ceiling.

Mike Cospers: They married soon after, and of course she moved to Liberty. But it wasn't a place they were going to be able to stay very long. Prior to David's arrival, the town had been the scene of an infamous murder that would be a landmark in the civil rights movement for the state. In September 1961, an activist named Herbert Lee, working with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, was murdered in broad daylight and in front of witnesses by a state representative named E.H. Hurst. The coroner's trial was conducted in a courtroom full of armed white men who were there to intimidate witnesses. And in the end, Hurst was acquitted. Medgar Evers would attend Lee's funeral.

One witness to the murder was Lewis Allen, another black farmer who'd attempted to register to vote, and faced intimidation and threats. He later tried to speak with federal investigators about Lee's murder, and he too was killed in 1964. Later investigations, including one by 60 Minutes, implicated the County Sheriff Daniel Jones. David moved to Liberty in 1963 and married Nori in 1964, not long after Alan was killed.

Nori Nicholas: The country was in huge sociological shift. It was the peak of the civil rights movement. We were kind of hiding out where we were because David was a yankee, a damn yankee. There was word spreading around that he was a FBI agent, and the house next door to us burned one night, and we thought for sure it was the Klan coming after us, but it wasn't.

Mike Cospers: Nonetheless, they knew they needed to look elsewhere, and David had the church planting bug. This was the beginning of the big sort, when a variety of factors like economics, politics, and these very racial tensions, remade the demographic maps of the U.S. We talked in Episode 2 about how that set the table for the rise of the mega-church. But inside some denominations, like the Presbyterian Church in the US where he served, it also caused resistance to church planting. As people were moving from rural communities to cities and suburbs, and as other populations shifted and changed, many established churches found themselves with dwindling numbers and empty pulpits. Would-be church planters had to overcome a mindset that resisted change, a mindset that would have rather seen young leaders take over an empty pulpit and revitalize a dying church. Finding someone who would send him out as a planter then, took a while.

Kenneth Ryskamp was a friend of David's from his college basketball days at the University of Miami, and he was the chairman of an elder board at a large Presbyterian church there. Ryskamp would go on years later to be the moderator for the PCA in 1981. He was the one who helped David get support to plant. The road to get there was a little rocky, with a false start in a planned community outside Naples, Florida, but ultimately they were commissioned to plant in Boca Raton.

The city has an interesting history. It was developed briefly as a resort town in the 1920s, but much of that development collapsed into bankruptcy at the end of the decade. During the second world war, it was the site of an air base and training ground for bombers. Post war, it was the home of two failed amusement parks. The real development didn't begin until IBM announced plans to build a factory there in the late 1960s, and they broke ground on the site in 1967. That was the same year that David and Nori would arrive to plant Spanish River Church.

Nori Nicholas: We stayed there working and planting Spanish River Church and getting into church planting, and we were there for 42 years before David retired. So it was a long haul we were there.

Mike Cospers: Their denomination went through a period of significant division over the next several years, largely over liberal theology and neoorthodoxy. In 1973, Spanish River would join 260 other conservative churches to form the Presbyterian Church in America, or the PCA.

Nori Nicholas: So obviously, when you start a new denomination, it was very... It was thinly scattered on the ground and there was a need for new churches. And so with David's desire for new churches, they asked him to head that up, which we did for Florida. And then they asked him to head it up with the southeast, or was it?, oh I forget. And so he was deeply involved with the planting of new churches for the PCA. And because of that, we decided that Spanish River, that we needed to plant our own churches too.

Mike Cospers: Spanish River's first church plant was on the west side of Boca Raton. And then in 1983, they planted Naperville Presbyterian Church in Illinois. For the better part of the next three decades, David Nicholas would continue the work, both because of his passion for the gospel and his heart for mentoring younger pastors.

As Nori looks back at it, part of his motivation was rooted in his own story. For one thing, he had deep empathy for those experiencing the loneliness of church planting because the obstacles have never really changed over the years.

But there was something else going on too, a deeper wound inside him from a broken connection that went all the way back to 1963.

Nori Nicholas: Through the divorce, his wife got full custody, which wives always got back in 1963. And he adored his sons, absolutely adored his sons. So he had that void within him, and I saw that all the time. And I was never able to have children, but God used that in an amazing way because he mentored so many young pastors. Oh my goodness. There's just hundreds of young pastors that he mentored through the years. So that pain was used to good effect.

Mike Cospers: We'll be right back.

 @FredHarrell

Fred Harrell: Yeah, so church planting was largely kind of this Bill Hybels attractional model stuff. And in my denomination, it was a little bit suspect feeling to people.

Mike Cospers: This is Fred Harrell. Fred is the founding pastor of City Church in San Francisco, which was planted as a PCA church and sponsored by Spanish River. They left the PCA over women's ordination in the mid-2000s, and later they distanced further when they became LGBTQ affirming. But in spite of those differences, Fred looks back with nothing but affection for David. His journey into church planting started in the early nineties, when he was doing campus ministry.

One year, he was looking for an alternative to the typical spring break trip. Instead of the beach, he took a group of students to New York City. While there, they visited a two-year-old church called Redeemer, planted by a former Westminster Seminary professor named Tim Keller.

Fred Harrell: They were exploding in growth. And my affinity for church planting started then because Tim gave church planters a different option, that you could be theologically rich and pragmatically effective at the same time. And that's when I got interested in church planting. I was like, Wait a second. Because I could go into my campus ministry and our students expected me to talk theology, we did all the time. But wrongly or right-

ly, because I'm not saying I had the right impression, but my impression at the time was church planters were more kind of, I don't know, whatever you call it, seeker sensitive. Seeker sensitive is the name. That's an old term, isn't it?

What I got from Tim was a phrase that we used a lot here at City Church in the early days, and still do, is not seeker sensitive or friendly, but seeker comprehensible. And the idea is that you could be full on, Here's the Christian faith with the theology and everything else, and at the same time grow and attract people.

Mike Cospers: It wasn't long before he was looking into planting himself, and like many who encountered Keller in those years, he was drawn to the idea of urban church planting in particular. But there was the perpetual obstacle of funding, so he began working through the denominational bureaucracy to get approval to plant, and then to get churches interested in him and his vision. That led him to an assessment in Atlanta in 1994.

Fred Harrell: That's when I met this character by the name of David Nicholas. Big presence, big personality, real pragmatic. But David knew his theology too, but very pragmatic. And the guy had grown a large church down in Boca Raton, but he'd also... Really ingeniously, the guy had been a part of planting, I don't know, maybe at least 50 or 75 or whatever, and not just in America, but also in Mexico and Brazil. So high on pragmatism, like get the job done, are you a good preacher or not, are you effective or not, have you gathered a crowd before.

And so when David got around the assessment center, what I was told like on day one, is, That's David Nicholas over there and he's gonna pick the two or three people here who he thinks are the best ones here, and he's gonna come after them. And so about day three, David came after me. He was such a blunt guy. I had a lot of acne issues in high school, a lot of scarring in my face, and I'm not particularly sensitive about it, I don't care, it's just one of those things. But David came up to me and gave me advice on what to do with my acne. He's like, Hey, you ever try Retin-A, you gotta smooth that out. I said, Yeah, I took Retin-A and acid all through high school, it was no fun.

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And then he began to tell me about what his church had done, and it was fascinating. David had basically, with great leadership, gotten the entire church on board for church planting and just how marvelous it could be. And in that conversation he said, We also were major supporters of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. And I said, Well, that's actually the kind of church I'd like to be planting is one that's in an urban environment. And he said, Well, let's keep on talking.

Mike Cospers: It would take a few years before it came together, but eventually David rallied behind Fred to plant City Church, and Fred joined a cohort of dozens of other pastors who were being sent out by Spanish River. The glue holding these planters together was called the Spanish River Church Planting Network. But as all this was happening, another vision was simmering for David, a vision of supporting churches that might not have fit the more stringent requirements of the PCA. Pastors who didn't necessarily have the seminary training or who weren't necessarily even part of the denomination. It would be a bigger tent of reformed, complementarian, evangelical churches driven by

the same philosophy: Identify young leaders you really believed in, and go in big to help them launch. The name of that network would be Acts 29, and the concept began to solidify during a trip to Seattle to visit another Spanish River Church planter.

Nori Nicholas: I guess Tommy Allen was planting a church in Seattle and we went across to see him. And he said, There's a young church planter here in town that's really struggling. He's an independent, he's all on his own, and he's got all kinds of talent and he's doing a great job, but he doesn't have anybody to support him and he doesn't have anybody to mentor him, I'd like you to meet him. And so Tommy Allen introduced us to Mark Driscoll, and David and Mark had some long conversations. We were only there for another couple of days. And he made arrangements with Mark to come over, to fly over to Boca and spend some time with us.

And as time went along, Mark had this huge desire to plant churches and to have his own network, so he would not come in under the Spanish River Network, but he agreed to come in under the Acts 29 network, since it didn't have that brand name. And he wanted a position of leadership, and David was happy to give it to him.

Mike Cospes: By this time, David Nicholas had either been planting a church or coaching church planters for 30 years. Their network was not just producing church plants, it was producing churches that planted churches. It was movement-oriented. And Driscoll wasn't even 30 years old yet.

Even so, when he showed up at a Spanish River gathering with some of the planters from the PCA, he made an indelible impression.

Fred Harrell: He was interested in being as acerbic and as shocking as he possibly could be. He's up there talking to.. And that group of people, most of those church planters had been really successful, whether they were American, Brazilian, or Mexican, and all of us were there to learn from one another, but none of us were rookies. In that room, you had guys who had planted their church 10 years ago and had now built a building, and they were multi staff and some of them had been seminary professors. Tim Keller was a seminary professor for five years before he planted Redeemer in New York. So these are people who are accomplished. And Mark talked to all of us like we were a first year seminary student. It was unbelievable. So he's pulling out all of his greatest hits, things like I read a book every day. Everybody just...We all laughed, we thought he was joking. And he doubled down. One of the church planters there stood up and said, So are you talking about children's books? And Mark was like, No, like real thick books. And then there was also the way he would say that, he would pick a topic and he would say, I've read every book on that, I've got a stack of books this high on whatever. And I just leaned over to Tim Keller and I said, This man is not well.

Mike Cospes: This moment in David Nicholas's story is not unlike that of so many older leaders who were part of Driscoll's ministry during the Mars Hill years. They saw a kind of raw talent, and his way with words, and the culture of the church in Seattle, in his commitment to the right doctrines. I can't imagine they were blind to the faults of pride and arrogance and exaggeration, but they saw so much potential in what could be if he were mentored and matured, they invested anyway.

In hindsight, it raises two questions. The first is whether any such potential is worth overlooking the obvious red flags. The second is whether we should have any confidence in our ability to mentor and mature young leaders with questionable character. In other words, is there some measure of hubris in seeing someone with this level of immaturity and thinking, I can get them ready to lead.

For a time, the strategy worked, and not long after those initial conversations with the Spanish River Network, a group of young leaders joined Driscoll and made their way down to Boca Raton. It was not what would define the DNA of Acts 29 though.

Here's Rick McKinley again.

Rick McKinley: The crazy thing was that first year it was this eclectic gathering, the craziest gathering. So it's Mark and me and Chris Seay and Shane Claiborne and Andrew Jones and Doug Padgett.

Mike Cospers: From a theological and doctrinal perspective, these folks are all over the spectrum, especially when you compare them to Driscoll.

Rick McKinley: And in one sense I thought, This is the next thing, right? Nobody has split at this point into liberal and conservative, nobody has signed a doctrinal statement and figured out who's liberal and who's right and who's wrong. We were all just sensing that something new was happening. Andrew Jones was like, I think we should write a creed. And you're like, There is something very magical happening. And then the next year, a doctrinal statement came out, and so that group ended, but that blew up fast.

Mike Cospers: A core group of the network did form, and Acts 29, which had been living under the umbrella of Spanish River Church, formed as a corporation in 2000 with David and two other leaders from Spanish River making up the board. Rick was one of the first planters approved for funds by Acts 29, all of which came from Spanish River since every other affiliated church, including Mars Hill was strapped for cash.

Rick McKinley: We had to have these core groups of 50, so I got my core group in Portland and he starts funding me, and then he's gonna make the tour of the west coast that summer. And he comes out and of course it's August and my 50 is probably like 25 at the best. And I'm like, Oh my gosh, this is horrible. And you know he hears this to every church planter he goes to. It's really... Everyone's out in their boats this Sunday or whatever. So I'm making my excuses why our attendance is low or whatever. And he's like, Rick, Portland's got a million people, you're gonna be fine, you just got to preach the gospel. I was like, It's so good.

Mike Cospers: Acts 29 hosted regular gatherings called boot camps to train planters for ministry, and one of the first ones ended up being infamous for a variety of reasons, not least of which being David's own sense of composure in a moment of crisis.

Rick McKinley: So we did a bootcamp at sea because everyone's flying to Boca and by the time you get hotels, cater it, all that stuff, we can actually do a cruise that is all inclusive. So that's the great idea. They give us rooms, so we do boot camp during the day,

then it's the disco floor at night. So we launch in Miami, we wake up in Nassau, and it's 9/11. So the morning that we wake up, the first tower's falling, the second tower falls, you get off the boat, and you got this tourist thing happening, they're playing steel drums while everybody's got AKs, and you're thinking the world has just ended. And yet it was this crazy moment because everybody on that boat or ship - I'm talking about like it's a boat, it's a cruise ship - but they're all connected to New York in some way, because this east coast thing. And they ask us to do, like, a service. So we're all 30-year-old dudes that are so cool and so woke and got it all figured out. None of us want to touch this. But David steps into it like it's nothing, and they pack out this auditorium, they lead this 9/11 service. And David just like waxes this thing, presents the gospel, explains it, comforts people, leads this whole thing. And we're just sitting there like, Okay, he's like the master.

Mike Cosper: There was a kind of magnetism around David for younger leaders, and the potential for these guys in their thirties to be mentored by a pastor in his seventies was promising.

But it wasn't going to last, not in this format anyway. From early on, tension grew between Mark and David. Here's how Nori Nicholas described it.

Nori Nicholas: It was quite prickly. Mark doesn't handle being in the room if he's not the kingpin in the room. And then of course there was David, and that just really bothered the heck out of him that David was like, you know, the alpha dog in the room. And he chafed against that, he chafed very much against that.

Mike Cosper: The organization itself had been built like many church plants are, quickly and loosely. And over time, the lack of clarity about Acts 29's mission became a source of conflict as well.

Rick McKinley: We would do an annual gathering and we remember Mark stood up and he goes, Here's our four values - he gave a talk - or three values. And David leaned over and said, Those are our values? I go, Uh, I guess. So it was that kind of a thing. Like Mark, that's when he said, We want to have a thousand churches, and David and I never talked about that, we never agreed on it. Somehow that becomes the target. And the problem with that was now anybody that wants to join gets counted as a church plant, just so we can get to a thousand. So we're not even planting churches anymore, it's I got 150, I'll sign the covenant, and I jump in and we start counting all these churches saying we're planting them.

I think in my mind, what I was passionate about was, No, we want to plant churches. Like we wanna raise up leaders, we want to raise up core groups, we want churches to send people out to fund, to launch. And so there's coaching, there's funding, and then there's actually sending people and leaders. There was a lot of churches that got planted with just coaching and got counted as, Oh yeah, we planted that church. And you know, church planting's like NASCAR, everybody's putting... You get money from everybody, you put their Baptist, Acts 29, Presbyterian, charismatic, Anglican. But I think... So I think the thing I wrestled with was we weren't assessing, it was this guy's got cool hair, he likes Mark, whatever, so he got funded. And now a year and a half later, he's preaching for an hour to 20 people and it's not growing, and his money's running out, what are we gonna

do. And so I would be the one that has to go out with the church closed sign or whatever, and have to teach this guy how to plant a church, essentially. Maybe you shouldn't work on your sermon for 30 hours, like, we don't need to do that right now.

Mike Cospers: Over time, these differences in vision became more acute and they combined with more intense personal conflicts that Rick himself experienced with Mark, but also that he witnessed Mark creating with others.

Rick confronted him directly, saying that they were at a point with the network where they could build bridges or could burn them down.

Rick McKinley: And he said, Yeah, I'm gonna burn them because if a fire's happening a crowd forms, basically.

Mike Cospers: Eventually Rick decided it was best to leave. Driscoll sucked all the oxygen out of any room he was in, and he didn't want to live in constant conflict. He resigned from the board in November, 2003, but stayed a member of the network for a little while longer. Then in '04, he left altogether.

Rick McKinley: Our last real communication between Mark and I, I said, Man, my hope for you is that you would find somebody to submit to, and he said... And I said, I don't care if it's Piper or somebody, but you need to find somebody to submit to. And he said, I can't submit to Piper because my church is bigger than his. And I thought, Yeah, I don't know where that kind of thinking comes from.

Mike Cospers: In the end, Mark wouldn't submit to David Nicholas either, despite his decades of experience and his track record of planting churches. It all came to a head in 2004, and there are almost as many accounts for David's exit from Acts 29 as there are people to ask about it. One of the most significant sources of conflict though, was the connection between governance and funding.

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In 2004, they were working through expanding the board. Rick had left, Darrin Patrick had come on, and other potential board members were under consideration. At the time, all of the funding from Acts 29 was still coming from Spanish River. David wanted to ensure that as the board expanded, Spanish River had more representation than just him. That led to an explosive conflict between David and Mark, and in December '04, David resigned.

You could probably do an autopsy here and find several ways that things went wrong. You could chalk some of it up to the strength of two hard charging personalities as well, but you also could see a distinction in the way that Mark and David saw the work. As Rick described it, Mark framed everything in terms of winning and losing, and partnerships were transactional. David wanted something more, perhaps for the very reasons Nori described earlier, wanting a sense of family.

Rick McKinley: David was quirky. There's no question that he was quirky, but he deeply loved his church planters. He wasn't in it for, Okay, we just... Like you did this thing. It was, he cared about the relationship and he cared about the planters and was so for them.

Mike Cospers: For his part, David went home and continued the work.

Nori Nicholas: We had planted a church, we had been in a church. We had gone through some of the church stuff that goes on in a church where people decide they're gonna target you, and we'd learned to deal with that kind of stuff. So basically, we just moved on and concentrated on the job that had to be done.

Mike Cospers: And Spanish River just kept planting churches. In fact, they continue to fund Acts 29 affiliated churches to this day.

Nori Nicholas: We were never big on branding on our network. It wasn't a big deal. The point was getting the job done, getting church planted, getting people under the sound of the gospel, getting people's lives changed, and people's turning around. Who cares about the numbers? I know the day David retired, Tommy Kiedis took over from him, and I remember Tommy came up to us and he said, David, how many churches have you planted through the Spanish River Network? And David said, I don't know. He said, Haven't you ever counted? And he said, I guess the accountant knows, if you wanna know, ask her. And about two hours later, Tommy bounced back and he says, Do you know that you've planted 250 churches in the Spanish River Network so far. And we had no idea until the day he retired how many churches. And his whole life was about church planting.

Mike Cospers: David retired from Spanish River in June, 2000. On January 16th, 2011, he returned to Spanish River to preach and update them on what he'd been up to.

David Nicholas: I started planting churches here at SRC years ago. And so before I left SRC, I talked to the elders about this new adventure, the Church Planting Network, and Spanish River joined the Church Planting Network so that you all are funding our church plants. We started with one church plant in Brooklyn in June, 2009. That's the church planting network. And right now we're working with 23 church plants in different parts of the world. So it has grown, but it's grown only because of the people of SRC.

Mike Cospers: He was 79 years old at this point, and he'd been at the work of planting churches for 44 years by then. And his eyes were only on the horizon to keep doing the work.

David Nicholas: It's great to be back. I love y'all and I want you to know I'm having a good time doing church planting and training pastors, and I praise the Lord that he's given me something in my old age.

Mike Cospers: Eight days later, on January 24th, he spent the morning training church planters. When lunchtime arrived, a group of them were still gathered around him, peppering him with questions, so he invited them over to his house for lunch and Nori fed them all. She described to me watching David sit at the table with them, reflecting on his own story and getting moved to tears still at the power of God's grace in his life. He passed away the next day

I spoke to Ron Tobias, a pastor at Spanish River who'd been at the church for more than

four decades, and he said that today you can trace their legacy of church planting to more than 500 churches worldwide. And while his name may not be as well known as Mark Driscoll's, the connection between Spanish River and Acts 29 continues. The planned speakers at their 2021 retreat include Acts 29's Director of Theological Training Tony Marita, and their Associate Director Doug Logan.

A while back Dave Travis from Leadership Network described to me how Gen X was one of the most successful, if not the most successful, church planting generation in North American history, and as I worked on this story, I couldn't help but wonder how much of that success is owed to the legacy of David Nicholas.

Rick McKinley: You know, I think the raddest thing is talking to, like, we got a new guy that just moved to town who's taken over for another pastor that's leaving, and he was in New York before this. And he's like, how'd you plant Imago, and I tell him, and he is like, David Nicholas planted me in New York. And the number of people that would say David Nicholas funded me to plant my church is... I don't think there's another name that people could say in this country that has as many church plants behind it, which is pretty cool, man.

Mike Cospers: Thanks for listening. If you want to support the show, please leave us a rating and review in iTunes. It will help other people find us. Subscriptions to CT are one of the best ways to support this kind of journalism. If you want to help us continue doing this work, consider joining today at orderct.com/Marshall.

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