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# Restoring Your City With Missional Communities

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The “why” and “how” of reaching your neighborhoods and communities with missional communities

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# Why Your City Needs Missional Communities

*Brad Watson*

I was riding in the back of an old and noisy Mercedes Benz up and down narrow cobble stone streets in Lisbon, when I realized I was part of a community and it was powerful. Someone was taking an interest in me, there were people who cared for me, there were people who shared life with me, and it made a difference in how I saw Jesus.

One of the leaders in our church was taking me to a bass guitar lesson. He was in his late thirties, a husband, dad, and business owner, yet he was driving me and my kid brother around so we could learn music. He took us into his home with his family and shared more than musical notes with us—he showed me what loving Jesus looked like for a busy business owner and how to use music to worship God.

But this was not one-on-one discipleship; this was a community effort. Others in our community would meet up with me to watch movies, others would share requests for healing, and the rest would

pray. Financial needs were cared for. Parties were thrown in celebration.

I remember lots of laughter and tears in that community. Above all, I remember Jesus' presence. Being part of that community helped Jesus go from blurry to clear. It wasn't just for me, it was for many. That community of believers called Graça, or "Grace" in English, made Jesus clear to many people.

Through that community Jesus made himself known to us and our city. This is the type of community we long for. This is the kind of community our cities need—ones that make the gospel known within and outside of it.

## **Good News in the City**

Our cities are the gathering place of culture, human capital, and change. Suburban flight is a reality as young educated creatives flock to cities for the opportunities and lifestyle it offers. All this comes on the heels of the American church surrendering property and influence in the urban core while finding its place as the religion of the suburbs.

Evangelical Christianity doesn't have a literal or cultural place in the city. We gave it up decades ago. Now, we're trying to reengage in a context completely different from the orderly and homogeneous context of the suburbs the church has made its home.

Cities need both worship gatherings and missional communities to intersect the people and needs of the city. (My book, “Sent Together”, expands even further on missional communities in cities). We need for missional communities in the city because it is in the context of relationship that the gospel shines brightly, speaks clearly, and welcomes sojourners with questions and doubts.

Oddly, the first step forward isn’t toward cutting edge strategies or culturally relevant events. It’s pressing into the gospel—the thing of first importance. The gospel is the good news that Jesus has defeated sin, death, and evil through his own death and resurrection and is making all things new, even us. This is good news in the city and for the city.

The city is where death, evil, and destruction is obvious to all. The affects of sin, whether it is acknowledged as sin or not, is exposed in every neighborhood. The city is where the abused gather together. It’s where the enslaved, broken, and downtrodden end up.

It’s where schools fail to keep kids safe. It’s where injustice is present on almost every corner. It’s where isolation from community, family, and others is rampant. Cities are settling grounds for fugitives and refugees. They gather orphans. They are the last stop for vulnerable women.

The city is also a place for hope. It’s where we hope in our humanity, ingenuity, non-profits, and creative solutions. The city is a place of beautiful artwork, music, and cuisine. Cities gather ideas. The city is where humans, created in God’s image, thrive in expressing some of

God's most beautiful attributes: compassion, mercy, creativity, and justice.

Despite the high volume of humans, each made in God's image, our hopes and solutions always fall short. Despite the population density, one of the biggest needs is loving community. Despite the creative capital, one of the biggest needs is justice and healing. Despite the plethora of opportunities, one of the biggest voids is lasting satisfaction and joy.

The gospel of Jesus is good news in the city. Sin, death, and evil have been defeated by Jesus through the cross and empty tomb. Jesus isn't just defeating. He is recreating, making all things new. This is good news in the cities of unfulfilled promise and expectation of complete restoration.

This good news is what every mayoral candidate promises but only Jesus delivers: not only a new city, but a new humanity. The gospel offers redemption, restoration, and renewal.

## **Community and Mission in the City**

The gospel saves us from sin and death toward something: unity with God, unity with his people, and the ministry of reconciliation the gospel of Jesus offers. In other words, Jesus calls us to himself, to his community, and sends us on his restorative mission. The gospel is the starting place. The cause for the gathering and scattering of his people on mission.

I've never been around a community that was centered on the gospel that wasn't on mission. A gospel-centered people is a missional people. I've never been around a community that loves one another, that doesn't have Jesus at the middle of everything they do. A gospel-focused people is a missional community.

As Jesus transforms us, we are witnesses to it in public, with friends, at work, and in our homes. The gospel makes us, as Paul says, ministers and messengers of reconciliation. God makes his appeal to the world through us! God's mission of reconciliation goes through gospel community—also known as the Church.

If the truth of Christ's life, death, and resurrection isn't woven into the fabric of everything a community does, it has no purpose outside of its own will to make its cities better. Without the gospel at the center, the community has no reason to endure and bare all things together other than its consumeristic pursuit of the ideal community. This is no different in the city.

Our cities need the gospel to be made visible and audible. This is certainly done on Sunday mornings in worship service throughout the city. However, it is just as crucial the gospel become pervasive in the city through God's scattered people. The city needs gospel communities on mission nestled into every crack of the city.

Our cities need communities of people who are learning to follow Jesus together in a way that renews their city, town, village, hamlet, or other space. They don't need fancy community. In fact, missional communities are always a messy collection of everyday citizens who

are devoted to Jesus, to one another, to their neighbors, and their city.

This means they invest in each others' lives, calling one another to repent and behold Christ daily. A missional community reorients their activity to center, not on themselves, but on Christ. They struggle forward as in-process-sinners redeemed by the unconditional and infinite grace of God. They share meals, step humbly into the injustice in their city, welcome others into community, and take care of each other.

We see seek to establish thriving communities because we long to see our cities renewed. I pray to see every nook, cranny, and neighborhood filled with life and restoration. Not simply restoration on the outside (with better schools, better housing, better inclusion of all into the thriving culture of a city, and better culture) but restoration on the inside (whole people, present with God, walking with him in every arena of life, sharing in our love for God, loving one another, and loving our city.) I'm certain that if our cities knew and experienced the power and grace of the gospel everything would change.

# 3 Critical Reasons for Missional Community

*Todd Engstrom*

Although there are a number of reasons why we have chosen to implement missional communities at The Austin Stone, there are a few critical reasons I want to highlight:

- ▶ A Theological Reason – The Community Apologetic
- ▶ A Philosophical Reason – Discipleship in a Consumer Culture
- ▶ A Pragmatic Reason – Reaching All of Our City

## **A Theological Reason for Missional Communities**

There are several theological works that have been written to date on missional community and missional church, ranging from personal identity rooted in Scripture to the organizational mandate of the church. Among these resources, I recommend books like *Total Church*, *The Forgotten Ways*, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, and other resources that are helpful.

One of the key distinctive theological reasons we have chosen missional communities resides in the Community Apologetic.

Through passages like John 13 and John 17, we see a unique testimony that God's people collectively give for the gospel. Theologically, we would draw heavily on the writings of Francis Schaeffer, Lesslie Newbigin, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer for the development of this idea.

This is also validated throughout church history-the most persuasive argument for the Christian faith is the Christian community. The majority of conversions throughout church history have come not through argumentation, but through belonging to a meaningful community before belief is ever required. For more on this idea, see the writings of Rodney Stark.

For us, this means that the church must not simply gather for worship and scatter for mission as individuals.

We must gather for worship AND gather for mission.

Practically, in order to embody the church in unique cultures in our city and be effectively mobilized for mission to our ENTIRE city, this means that we must have smaller, nimble communities who are uniquely expressing the gospel in their neighborhoods, workplaces, and networks of people.

Throughout the New Testament, it seems that the community is involved in all facets of life, not simply a once a week gathering for mutual accountability and encouragement in the mission.

# A Philosophical Reason for Missional Communities

Philosophy of ministry is the direct application of theological convictions into a unique cultural context. Our theological convictions about the character of God, the truth of the gospel, and our mission in the world don't change, but our culture shapes how we apply those truths into functional ministry.

In Austin, Texas, we find ourselves ministering in a highly consumeristic, radically individualistic, and materialistic group of people.

Unfortunately the worldview of the culture has also pervaded the worldview of the local church, and many of the people who engage in our worship services, listen to our sermons, and participate in our ministries are more formed by their unconscious desire to consume than the gospel.

We are systemically disciplined by the culture, and the church must have a systemic response to disciple in the way of Jesus.

The American church has often recognized the problem of individualism, presenting small groups as the typical solution for isolated people. Similarly, we recognize the problem of materialism, and have presented opportunities for radical generosity.

It is very rare, however, for the church to have a response to consumerism. We are still plagued by systems of thought that cater to consumers, rather than encourage individuals to be self-feeding missionaries.

Honestly, this is why The Austin Stone has gotten so much push-back from our people on the idea of missional community – we are actively combatting the idolatry and worldview of the church that has run deep into our hearts and minds.

In order for the church to be effective in discipling the people whom God has entrusted us, we need to have a systemic response to the pervasive worldview. We cannot expect to confront idolatry on a deep level if our systems are reinforcing consumerism.

Think about the typical small group-it is highly driven around the needs of the Christian, it is often centered around teaching or bible study from an outside source, and rarely does it demand more than simply a meeting once per week.

Missional Community presents a compelling alternative that calls people from consumerism to the life of a missionary in community in a way that is attainable for the everyday person to live out their God given identities and calling.

## **A Pragmatic Reason for Missional Communities**

As a church, we believe that God has called us to make disciples EVERYWHERE in our city. 71% of the city of Austin, if asked to come to a worship gathering, would decline.

If we want to engage the entire city with the gospel of Christ, we have to take the church to people. This requires every single

member of the body of Christ to live a missionary life, not simply the organization itself.

Practically, missional communities provide the vehicle by which the church scattered can engage every sphere of society. Thousands of people gathered on a Sunday makes little to no difference missionally in the lostness of our city. Thousands of missionaries incarnating the gospel together in our city has the power to change a city.

Also, as a large church, we must have a place where the saints are cared for and pastored, where the “one anothers” of Scripture are lived out, and where we can exercise oversight and authority consistent with the New Testament.

If all we were to do was corporately gather, and corporately engage in mission, our elders would still be lacking in our execution of the biblical vision for shepherding the flock of God.

Pragmatically, we need a vehicle by which the church can care for one another, support one another, and where we can practically meet the needs that arise in the community of God.

# What Is A Missional Community?

*Todd Engstrom*

Whether you're new to the idea of missional communities, or have been implementing them for a long time, I'd love to start some dialogue around what they actually are. Is a missional community something new, or just a repackaging of an old idea?

So let's take a look at this question:

## **"What is a Missional Community?"**

This article will be unpacked in the parts below:

Part 1 - Other's Definitions of Missional Community

Part 2 - A Vision for Missional Community

Part 3 - A Definition of Missional Community

Part 4 - On Mission with God

Part 5 - A Pocket of People

Part 6 - More Than a Bible Study

Other's Definitions of Missional Community

When others interact with an idea, it provides clarity on your own thinking. Below are some ways that other movements around the country would define missional communities. I have learned from each one of them:

Jeff Vanderstelt of Saturate and Soma Communities

Neil Cole of CMA Associates

Mike Breen of 3DM Ministries

Logan Gentry of Apostles Church NYC

Alex Absalom of RiverTree Church

All of these have distinct language, but they all share a common conviction that the community is primarily oriented around mission, not community.

## **A Vision for Missional Community**

Like many churches, The Austin Stone has a very clear vision of what we believe God has called us to. We phrase our vision this way:

*To be a New Testament church existing for the supremacy of the name and purpose of Jesus Christ.*

Through years of experience, prayer and study, we have gained a clearer understanding what it means to be this church in the city of Austin.

Our mission, the application of our vision to our context, became this:

To build a great city, renewed and redeemed by a gospel movement, by being a church for the city of Austin that labors to advance the gospel throughout the nations.

As we've mulled over that mission in our city, we were consistently pressed to consider that there are pockets of people throughout Austin and the nations who have not been renewed and redeemed by the gospel.

There are so many in the city of Austin who would not even consider darkening the door of a Sunday worship service.

Faced with this particular challenge, we realized that some of our forms needed to change if we were ever going to see a movement ignited.

That meant changing on the smallest level: we must declare and demonstrate the gospel in community on mission to every pocket of people for a movement to occur.

The Austin Stone, therefore, is in the process of becoming a network of missional communities. We are teaching small groups of people, called of God, joined by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who by the power of the Holy Spirit to pursue the renewal and redemption of their community and the nations together.

# A Definition of Missional Community

Our vision sets the stage for us to talk more about a missional community.

We are often asked “what is a missional community?” Although definitions are limited in conveying the fullness of an idea, a missional community, as we would define it, is:

A community of Christ followers on mission with God in obedience to the Holy Spirit that demonstrates tangibly and declares creatively the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a specific pocket of people.

Because it’s impossible to capture everything we mean into a sentence, let me take some time to expand on what we mean by this statement:

The first piece of our definition that I want to highlight is this:

## “A Community of Christians”

In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has redeemed a people for himself whom He empowers and sends to be his witnesses, as we see in John 20:21 and Matthew 28:16-20.

Additionally, as Jesus indicates in John 13 and John 17, the community of God is sent for a purpose.

We are called and sent to show a hurting, broken, and dying world that Jesus is who he says he is and did what he said he did.

The purpose of Christian community has always been to demonstrate God's character to the world. We do this as individuals for sure, but our communities are to be defined in this way too.

Another facet of this part of our definition is that being a faithful witness requires a community. You won't be an effective missionary without the apologetic of your community.

We often say that we need to do "Lone Ranger" evangelism, but more often than not, it's a dead end. Community is essential to mission!

## **On Mission with God**

When we say, "On Mission with God", we want to be clear about something. God is about bringing glory to His name and establishing His kingdom and reign in the world. It's what He's always been up to throughout redemptive history!

God is saving and blessing a people through the finished work of Jesus that they would make disciples and bring his kingdom to the world around them. The life of the community is bound up in participating in God's mission in the world and making disciples of Jesus.

Most churches would not disagree with us on this particular issue, but when it comes to practically working out what it means to make disciples, everyone has a different definition and strategy. We believe that mission of making disciples should play out in two

primary ways in EVERY community, from large to small, and every individual:

The first way is to “Demonstrate the Gospel Tangibly”. Just as Jesus came demonstrating the kingdom through selfless acts of service, we actively look for opportunities to meet the felt and real needs of our neighbors. We seek to become a blessing to our neighbors, and demonstrate the reality of God’s new kingdom.

When you look at Jesus, however, he did not simply stop at healing and meeting needs. He consistently spoke a true message of great hope to those whom he encountered. Just look at the story of the woman at the well: He met her where she was, but through her expressed need he spoke of the true needs of her heart.

Therefore, as communities patterned after Jesus’ life, we “Declare the Gospel Creatively”. A missional community listens to and understands the stories of their neighbors in order to be able to tell the Gospel Story in ways that are Good News to those specific people. We want our communities to wrestle with and understand how to speak the good news of Jesus’ perfect life, his sacrificial death, and his resurrection in power are indeed good news to their neighbors.

## **A Pocket of People**

Finally, we turn to who the community exists for: “A Pocket of People”. God’s grace in Jesus is good news for those in the church and those outside the church – we all need the gospel!

Just as the Father sent the Son to a specific time, place, and people, so the Spirit does with the church, sending us to specific groups of neighbors. A missional community is seeking to wrap their lives up with the pocket of people that God has placed them in.

For us, a “neighbor” is anyone you cannot avoid or anyone who has needs that you have the resources to meet. Your neighbor may be those who live next-door, those you work with, those you play with, or those with whom you share some sort of affinity.

Your neighbor may also be someone you have little in common with but whom God has placed squarely in your path or specifically called or commanded you to care for.

A missional community is a group of people who have a common set of neighbors and are intentionally living lives among them together.

## **More Than a Bible Study**

To review the definition of a missional community:

A community of Christ followers on mission with God in obedience to the Holy Spirit that demonstrates tangibly and declares creatively the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a specific pocket of people.

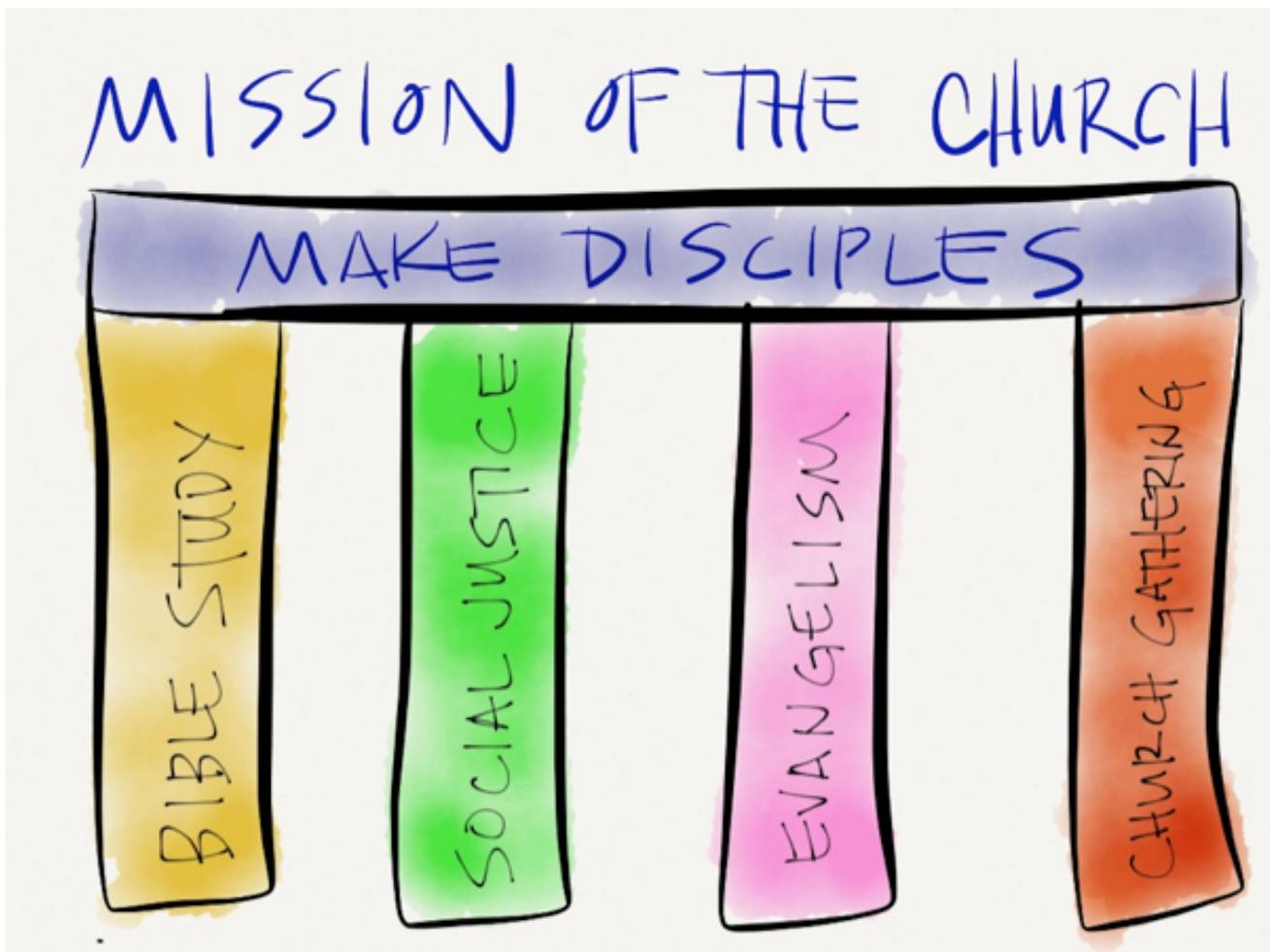
We could probably expand several volumes on on theological, philosophical and practical levels. I want to highlight one distinction that is important for us in pursuing these kinds of missional communities at The Stone.

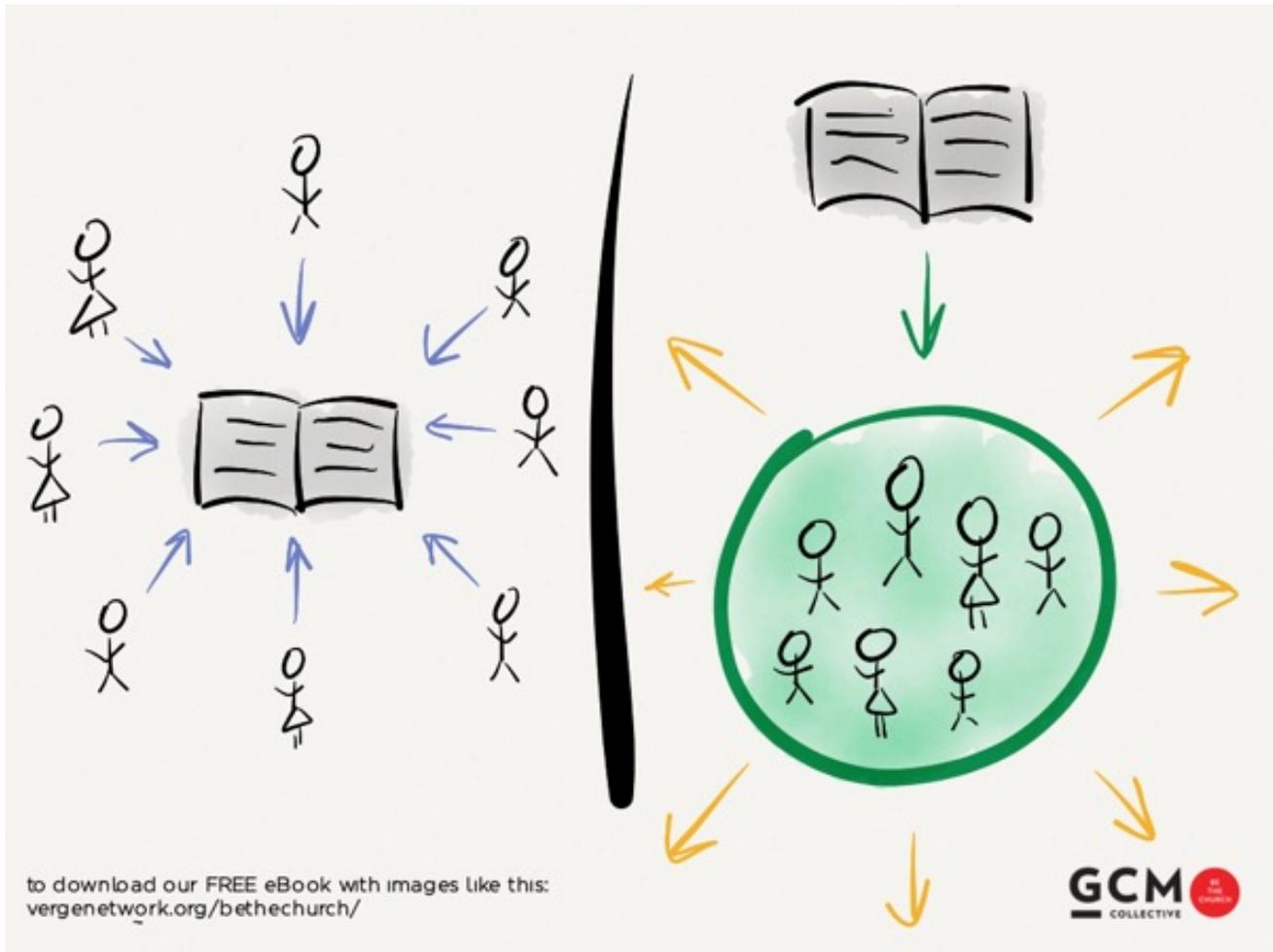
A missional community by nature is intended to be more than a typical bible study.

For us, a missional community is not just a bible study, it's not just a fellowship group, it's not just a social action club, it's not just a support group, and it's certainly not just a weekly meeting.

Healthy missional communities include all of those things over time, but it's a family of missionaries learning to follow Jesus in every area of their lives.

My friend Seth McBee has illustrated this idea well:





A missional community is a group of people asking “What does loving my city and neighbor really look like?” and “how can we make disciples of Jesus together?”

Often times, our missional communities realize Jesus may ask far more of them than they ever thought. The good news though, is that we are experiencing and knowing Jesus where He is...on mission to the broken and lost.

# Top 3 Missional Community Misconceptions

*Brad Watson*

This is a fact of life: when people are talking and listening crucial things get misunderstood. Unspoken expectations and burdens are shared unintentionally between two communicating forces. No one has ever written a book, done a training, or intentionally led people to these missional community misunderstandings.

And yet, these three misconceptions are prevalent. It has to do with how we teach. It has to do with how we listen. Regardless, these things have to be cleared up.

## **1. You Can't Study the Bible in a Missional Community**

I hear this regularly as I coach missional community leaders and brainstorm next steps. I was once meeting with a leader who was wanting to remind his community in the essentials of the gospel, their identity, and God's mission to make all things new. He was considering various guides and primers. His group had already been through several so I shared this idea:

Why don't you take several weeks and study 1st Peter? You could read a section at a time and ask one another key questions about what it says about God, the gospel, the church, and following Jesus. You could show them from the source and they could discover as a community from the Bible all the things you want to teach them.

The leader looked at me as I spoke like I was being sarcastic. He responded as though I was testing him, "But we can't study the Bible, can we? We aren't supposed to, right?"

How have we been so misunderstood?

*"We aren't a Bible study we are a Bible doing."*

*"A missional community isn't a Bible study."*

I've uttered these two statements many times myself. They sound good and pack a punch on Twitter, but it isn't the whole truth. Missional communities have to be Bible studies that lead to Bible doing. Our thoughts about the power and authority of Spirit breathed Scriptures are too small if we think you can read it without being compelled to action or that you don't need it to be faithful.

When a missional leader says she wants her disciples to be about Bible doing and less about Bible studies she is saying: Let's not just hear and read this stuff, but let's do it (James 1:22). You have to hear it. You can't make disciples of Jesus without teach disciples with the Bible. You can't have a thriving discipleship environment without it.

Throughout the New Testament, even in an age that pre-dates the printing press, Jesus, his disciples, and the churches they plant relied

heavily on the Old Testament to make disciples, form churches, refute false doctrine, and clarify the gospel.

Jesus and his disciples so thoroughly understood its importance they could quote large sections from memory (Luke 4:1-13, Luke 4:18-20, Luke 6:3-5). Jesus uses the Bible to withstand temptation (Luke 4:1-13), announce his presence and the coming of the kingdom (Luke 4:18-20), and rebuke of religious leaders who don't understand the grace and love of God (Luke 6:3-5). Jesus teaches his disciples the whole of the Old Testament is about him and his redemption of the world.

The disciples believed him and went on to preach from the Bible throughout Acts and include references and direct quotes throughout their equipping and clarifying letters. There are over 800 references to the Old Testament in the New Testament. If the very first disciples relied so heavily on teaching and speaking the Bible, why do we think we don't need it?

Any community that is taking the mission of God seriously and remains a community will regularly read and study the Bible together. If you are committed to following Jesus and living all of life under his authority, you will regularly learn from the Bible. In fact, a lack of urgency to go to the Scriptures is a primary diagnostics test for a missional community. If the community isn't desperate to learn from it, be encouraged by it, or find meaning and truth in it, they probably aren't living on mission or in community.

## 2. Worship Gatherings are a Necessary Evil

We regularly teach people that they, themselves, are the church. We clarify to folks that the church is not an event, a time slot, or a building.

No, the church is God's people sent into the world as servants of Jesus and ambassadors of His kingdom. This is completely true and there is a much needed correction amidst event and consumer driven church culture.

People take this truth, however, and understand that events, time slots, or buildings are not part of being the church. Gatherings of the church for worship, teaching, communion, sharing, and learning are seen as optional at best and a curse to avoid at worst.

The worship gathering of a collection of missional communities in their city is viewed as a necessary evil and a distraction from being the real church in missional communities.

They reason: if we are the church, why do we need to get together and hear a sermon? If we are the church, why do we have to get together for singing? Isn't that stuff getting in the way of us being the church? If "real discipleship" is life-on-life, in community, and on mission, how does a worship gathering fit? It seems counterproductive.

Here is the kicker: if you are serious about a scattered missional church, you have to gather your communities regularly in one place.

Gatherings reorient our worship. At gatherings, we are challenged and invited to worship the one true God. We return to worshipping God instead of ourselves, other gods, and idols. Essentially, worship gatherings are rhythmic celebrations reminding of who God is and what he has done. They call us to remember who we are.

We proclaim the gospel in song, we hear the gospel in preaching, we pray for gospel understanding and repentance, and we touch and taste the image of the gospel in communion.

The elements of a worship gathering remind us of the gospel. Everything we do when we gather reminds us of the gospel, who we are because of the gospel, and our role in God's mission.

The gathered church points to our unity (Eph. 4:1-5), because we see the local church in one place. We are reminded that there are many of us with the same belief, practice, mission, and leadership. It is in these gatherings of the scattered church we have a picture of our mutual submission to one another and our collective belief in the gospel.

In other words, we know we are not going it alone. We know there are other communities out there, other believers, and other missionaries. In the same way that the gathering demonstrates our unity, it also nurtures our unity. They enforce our common language, symbols, story, theology, practices (enacting theology), and mission.

Finally, the gathering commission us into mission together. All of the things mentioned above supports, enhances, encourages, empowers,

and equips the scattered (missional communities) in mission. By getting together we stir or spur one another on to good deeds and love, which is why we cannot forsake gathering together (Heb 10:24-25). The gatherings commission the church into life in community and on mission.

### **3. Multiplying Communities = Success**

In our early years in Portland, we multiplied our missional community four times. Every six to nine months we were sending people out. We were teaching the content, modeling the lifestyle, and strategically getting new people in and out of our door.

We even baptized a law student who came into our community through a poker game. We were living the idyllic missional movement. It was an exciting time of growth and we witnessed God do extravagant things through those multiplied communities.

This type of multiplication became the standard for success and the picture of multiplying disciples. Each of those new communities we sent out lived a beautiful expression of community and shared mission in regular and ordinary ways.

As we gathered leaders to share what God has done they would come discouraged. "All we've done this year is figure out how to love one another and cared for a few families in our neighborhood...

We've all definitely been changed by the gospel, but we aren't even close to multiplying. We really don't know what we are doing the

thing." They thought multiplying their community was the mark of success.

What we were doing was rapidly organizing groups, casting vision for what could be, and giving leaders tools to implement. I confused that with making disciples. I thought I could give myself a big pat on the back for that disciple multiplying work.

The reality is, the leaders we sent out have multiplied disciples. They've done the long work of loving a group of people for years. They've taught people the gospel through their long obedience. They've stepped into the suffering of their neighborhoods. They've wept with the broken and they've celebrated with the redeemed.

Multiplying disciples isn't as simple as getting eight people to know and desire living a missional lifestyle together. Multiplying disciples takes years of faithfully speaking and demonstrating the gospel. It isn't sexy but it's beautiful.

## **Other Misconceptions**

These don't need much explanation other than they aren't true! For some leaders, communities, and contexts they might be true.

But don't carry them as burdens in your leadership, community, and context.

There is freedom to be God's people on God's mission in your own unique way.

- You have to eat food every week
- The leader has to host
- You have to live in a walkable and bike-able neighborhood
- You have to throw big parties
- Your job and workplace are insignificant and a hinderance

# Your Personal Missional Community Vision

*Logan Gentry*

It may seem odd to suggest a personal missional community vision seeing as this is about a community coming together for a mission. While odd, I've seen many missional communities flounder because the individuals within or leading the community had not taken the time to cultivate their own personal understanding and vision for missional communities.

The personal missional community vision is needed to serve the overall collective missional community vision, which I will have more on in a later post. The need is great, but an error could be holding so tightly to your own personal vision that it becomes about you over the community.

Everyone has a vision for their community, but it is typical found in unspoken expectations, hopes, or disappointments. Everyone must evaluate their aims for community to see if it is line with God's heart for His people.

## **Why the Vision?**

The “success” of your missional community depends on everyone being committed to something greater than themselves, mainly the gospel of Jesus Christ. When each person goes a step further to process and consider how the gospel of Jesus Christ shapes their approach to being on mission with the community of God it becomes a game changer.

The reason I developed my own personal missional community vision (see below) is because I need a North Star to come back to when I get off track. I get tired, distracted, and concerned with other things. What do I mean by North Star?

The North Star is the only star that doesn't appear to change positions and is always steady. Because of that, it can serve as a navigation tool and has for centuries. Our vision is intended to serve as a North Star. Steady enough to guide us when everything around us changes.

## **How do I cultivate this North Star vision?**

Often our vision is informed by experience instead of scriptural truth. Experience can be an assist, as it informs what has blessed us and helped us, but nostalgia often causes experience to blind us from what was incomplete about our own experience.

Instead, we must search the scriptures to be informed and spend time processing how we naturally approach community and mission. As we process our natural approach, we must be willing to let the scriptures expand our natural approach to match God's instructions for us.

## **Some questions to consider:**

- ▶ *Why am I involved in my (small group, missional community, community group)?*

Try and be honest about the needs you have, the desires you have in leading, and your hopes for the community.

- ▶ *How do the scriptures affirm my natural approach to being involved?*

The scriptures agree with our needs, our desires to lead, and our hopes for community, but not all of them.

- ▶ *How do the scriptures expand my understanding of being involved in God's community and on God's mission?*

Nobody has it figured out perfectly, so chances are you don't either. God desires for us to grow in greater understanding of His ways and more like Christ with our life. Allows the scriptures to expand your understanding.

- ▶ *How does the gospel of Jesus Christ inform my approach to community?*

The gospel can free us of reputation management, of behavior modification, of preferential approaches to relationship, and empower us for God's mission.

▶ *How does the gospel of Jesus Christ guide my interaction and attitude toward my neighbors, co-workers, and boss?*

Relationships with neighbors and our friends in the workplace can be very satisfying and very frustrating. Only following Christ allows us to approach these relationships well.

## **My vision with your vision**

The harder part is taking your North Star vision and allowing it to be informed more practically and even refined by others in community.

Moving vision from personal to collective requires compromise and while compromising sounds bad, it actually results in the community being able to accomplish more than just your vision would.

I'd like to share my vision and encourage you to cultivate your own.

## **My vision:**

For the gospel of Jesus Christ to guide me as I enter into my missional community so that I don't hide my shortcomings or sin, but feel free to share of my need for God, repentance, and faith.

I desire to enter my missional community ready to meet needs and have others meet my needs as the family of God. I desire to see people become more like Jesus through the scriptures and applying the gospel to every area of life. I hope people find greater joy, hope, and excitement for life through our community's love for one another.

Lastly, I desire for my friends and neighbors to see and experience God's love through our community serving and inviting them into our family.

## **What's your Personal Missional Community Vision?**

There's no doubt you have a vision for your community, but chances are you haven't analyzed, processed or voiced it. Take the opportunity to articulate your expectations, hopes, and dreams then let God shape your vision beyond what you have experienced or imagined.

# Cultivating a Collective Missional Community Vision

*Logan Gentry*

In the last part, I encouraged you to identify your personal missional community vision, to develop a “North Star” vision that guides you despite the change in people or circumstance that occurs throughout the life of a missional community. The bigger challenge is moving your personal missional community vision into a collective missional community vision.

A collective missional community vision is the expanded and shared vision of the entire community who are committed together to know and follow God on mission.

The collective vision values the diversity of visions, stories, gifts, and talents that a community brings together by praying, dreaming, and exploring together what God has in store for your community.

## Expanding Your Personal Vision

The hardest part of cultivating the collective vision is seeing your personal vision change through the process, but greater joy comes in unity than solidarity for the gospel. As you have sat with your vision,

there is much good that you bring to the community through your pursuit of God and Him guiding you, but it is incomplete without others voices and values.

It took humility from Christ to do the will of the Father, to trust His life and vision to a group of disciples who would fail him, and then to allow the diverse perspectives of His people to lead the mission forward. As we follow Christ, we join Him in humility as we trust our vision, ideas, and hopes to others and join ourselves together for the collective vision over our own.

Pride is the killer of the soul as well as the killer of a missional community. Avoiding it requires that we come with humble confidence in God's hopes, confident of His passion for His church, but humble in seeing that it takes the whole church, not just one Christian to move the vision into reality. This is an act of faith, believing that God can and will accomplish far more than we will ever be able.

## **A Missional Community Vision Night**

One of the best ways to cultivate a collective vision is by having a missional community vision night. (By the way, it's never too late to do this, so plan it anytime if you're a leader and suggest it anytime if you're not leading).

The aims of a vision night are to display the vision, expand the vision and excite the community for the vision.

## Display the Vision

When we think of vision, we often want to jump to teaching, explaining, and inspiring believing our words are the only capable means of vision casting. This is necessary but the vision also needs to be caught by other means, mainly modeling.

This is best served through the hospitality that is cultivated during this time. Eat a meal together, laugh as you enjoy each other's company, care for the events, activities and concerns in one another's life. Hospitality is a spiritual gift, but also a command because it displays the welcoming heart of God in Christ.

Let the vision be caught just as much as you cast it.

## Expand the Vision

Identify a time while you are together to expand your vision by inviting others to voice their desires, hopes, and vision for the missional community.

### **Some questions you could ask:**

- What do you hope God would do in this missional community?
- In 6 months, what stories would you want to tell about our community?
- How do you hope this missional community is beneficial for everyone who is a part of it?

- How do you hope our missional community benefits our neighbors?
- Why do you love this neighborhood? How can we enhance our neighborhood?
- Who do you hope sees the love of God through our missional community?

There are many more questions you could ask, but your aim is to invite the entire community to express their desires and hopes.

## **Excite the Community for the Vision**

As the vision expands, there's an opportunity to settle on the vision by sharing excitement, affirming people's additions, and pray to solidify the vision.

This is the "What's next?" portion of the collective vision casting and you will want to identify ways to pray, the next opportunity your community has to engage in this vision, and a way to articulate the vision. Encourage your missional community leader (or if you are the leader) to articulate the aims of the community in writing to distribute through email as a way to follow up on the collective vision.

## Remembering and Evolving the Collective Vision

While the excitement around this vision will increase after a vision night, the way to sustain the excitement is through remembering and recasting the vision regularly. Seek for ways to easily articulate this vision with those inside your community and your neighbors.

Lastly, the reality is that this collective vision will evolve over time because we are following God whose plans are greater than ours and He will ultimately form and lead the community. These vision nights can be a regular practice throughout the life of the missional community to remember and join God as He evolves your vision going forward. I'll have more on this in an article next week.

The scriptures say “without vision, the people perish” encouraging us to insure that all take ownership of the vision to see the flourishing of the community of God on mission together.

# Customizing Missional Communities For Your Context

*Logan Gentry*

## Customizing Missional for Each Church

The books and resources surrounding missional communities are largely pragmatic. The initial stream of resources flowed out of the success of a local context with local rhythms and practices. They have been helpful, but when embraced as the method for all places and all times, they lack the ability to meet the needs of every context.

The next phase for any church seeking to be missional is to take missional principles and adapt them to the gifts, needs, and missional reality of their local context.

## Missional Practices Don't Work in Every Context, but Missional Principles Do

When I first began to dive into the missional community conversation I read everything I could, from Alan Hirsch's *Forgotten Ways*, Neil Cole's *Organic Church* to the *Field Guide for Missional*

Communities by 3dm, but it was Steve Timmis and Tim Chester's Total Church that finally captured my attention. Their first 3 chapters voiced the questions jumping in my head, "If we started with the gospel, what type of church would be formed?"

I loved this question and it led me to other leaders in the missional community conversation like Jeff Vanderstelt at Soma Communities and Hugh Halter at Adullam. Then Verge Conference stepped on the scene to gather the theologians and practitioners. Everyone published books, articles, and guides to instruct us in missional communities.

These resources were like fresh water for the thirsty missional soul, but I began to realize something about these books, methods, and approaches.

## **Missional practices don't work in every context, but missional principles do.**

I've started, led, multiplied, tried and failed missional communities in the suburbs, in college ministry, and now in New York. Every community is unique, but the temptation is to treat every missional community the same. This happens when there is an emphasis on missional practices instead of principles.

Missional practices focus on the everyday actions, regular rhythms, and needed content, structure, and method for missional communities. This is the ethical, or practical, result of missional

theology and principles which is essential, but missional communities are never a one-size-fits-all model.

## **Missional Principles**

The missional community conversation is moving towards developing local, customized approaches to fit each church and context instead of institutionalized missional practices defined by the missional professionals.

The missional professionals never set out to dictate the exact content, structure, and rhythms for every community. They sought to share the great work of God in their church for the benefit of His global church.

It was us, the churches who were learning, who took their stories, resources, and celebration and codified them as a new missional law to be followed for the same missional results. We copied and pasted their ideas and ways into our contexts assuming it to be the perfect formula.

In writing, we call the copy-and-paste approach plagiarism, in missional communities we too often call it normal best practices.

As churches have sought to implement this new missional law, they have seen the shortcomings of copying and pasting the same practices, content, and rhythms everywhere. They are once again questioning the missional approach altogether.

The temptation of many is to say it just doesn't work, instead of recognizing that no copy and paste approach to church ministry works. This is leading to a return to missional principles which is good news for each church and the conversation as a whole.

The core missional principles are gospel identity, word-centered, mission oriented, and community driven with an aim toward contextual sensitivity.

Each of these can be fleshed out on their own, but the focus here is on taking principles into local custom practices.

These principles can and should look different in practice depending on your context and the season of your community. You must do the work of prayer, listening to and following God, and collaborating as a community to assess and implement these principles into practices that glorify God and join Him on mission.

## **Adapting for Your Context: Missional Communities are a Custom Model**

A (little too long) article like this can make this sound easy, but it is difficult to develop your own approach with these principles.

I like how Dr. Tim Keller describes preaching and think it applies here:

*“When you listen and read one thinker, you become a clone... two thinkers, you become confused... ten thinkers, you’ll begin developing your own voice... two or three hundred thinkers, you become wise and develop your voice.”*

How do you develop your own voice or practices?

Customizing Missional Communities requires adapting to the scriptures, communion with God in prayer, participating in the culture and lives of your neighbors, then assessing your approach together as a community.

Missional Communities do not come with an IKEA manual and extra wood pegs, they must be formed from God into the culture and not separate from them.

Even as I try to guide you into how, I’m hesitant to provide a 5-step plan to take the 4 principles of missional communities to get the 3 results you are looking for, but I’ll provide the following simple guidance.

- 1) Prayerfully read the gospels, acts, and one epistle from Peter, Paul and John. Ask God to show you the differences in each personality or community and why.
- 2) Ask your neighbors, co-workers, and friends outside of the church questions about what they love, how they spend their time, and what they wish a church would be like. Listen and observe, sit with God with the answers.

3) Think about your community and where they are in understanding God, His mission, and the culture around them. Consider the journey you and your community will need to take to repent, change, and join God's mission by faith.

4) Have conversations with your community that are open-ended toward the type of church their neighbors and friends need. Be open to church as you know it changing.

5) Seek to establish ANY rhythm that will engage with God and others, then be flexible to adapt as you follow God on His mission. At some point, quit talking, and learn by doing, failing, and changing.

6) Trust in the God who is already on mission to your neighbors and friends and not in the missionary of another context to guide you.

The greatest joy is found when we communion with God, then watch Him work in our lives and in the lives of those we love. We give Him the glory, the praise, and our worship increases. It's so much better than following a manual.

# 5 Reasons People Don't Lead a Missional Community

*Doug Paul*

There are any number of reasons that people choose not to lead a Missional Community. As we seek to engage the people God has entrusted to us and to mobilize them into Jesus' mission, here are some of the most important ones for us to grapple with and understand.

## **1. Change is difficult for most people... much less real change within the church**

It's important to know that change is actually a fear-inducing thing for most people.

While it might be easy to vilify people or paint them with a broad brush, our role is to come alongside of them and to join in what Jesus is already doing in their life. In Acts 20:28, Paul charges the Ephesian elders to look after the whole flock...not just the ones who like change!

If we want to lead people into their calling as disciple-making, Kingdom-bringing ambassadors of the Gospel, we need to meet them

where they are and understand what change means to them and does inside of them.

## **2. There is genuine fear about stepping into the front lines of mission**

Whether people articulate it or not, they often already know there is an opportunity to be on the front lines of mission that they aren't presently stepping into.

We need to be honest about the fact that there is a real spiritual battle waging for the hearts and souls of every man, woman and child and for the whole world that God so loved. Stepping into the fray of this battle has real costs.

I often wonder if our enemy is genuinely OK leaving good, well-meaning Christians alone so long as they don't actively engage with what's truly happening in the heavenlies.

Leading a Missional Community is a Declaration of War. It's choosing to live into what Jesus said to Peter in Matthew 16: "The Gates of Hell will not prevail." They can't keep you out.

That's offensive language, not defensive. That's a front line charge into enemy territory.

### **3. They said 'yes' to a gospel that has far more to do with the future than the present**

Lots of wonderful Christians, who have been saved by the grace of Jesus, have said 'Yes' to a presentation of the Gospel that has said that the Good News is coming and that it isn't to be experienced right here, right now, TODAY.

And so for many believers, the Christian life is about surviving, gritting their teeth, and making it through to Heaven. In other words, discipleship (which is about there here and now) is optional...because the Gospel they said 'Yes' to understood it as optional.

Discipleship wasn't good news...it was an add-on after they said 'Yes.'

This has a profound effect on what people understand the life of the Church to be about and how disciples go about their daily lives. It's going to be VERY, VERY hard to convince people to lead Missional Communities if they understand discipleship as optional.

Their whole operating system is built on something different. It would be like trying to run an ANDROID app on an Apple Operating System.

It just doesn't work.

So for many people, we will need to go to the very root of how they understand their faith.

## **4. It would mean ordering their life around Jesus' mission and not their own immediate wants and desires**

We don't need to belabor this one, do we? Our whole Western culture is built on consumerism and satisfying our wants and desires as quickly as possible.

Missional Community life is saying that we are going to orient the whole of our life and the life of this missional family together around the mission of Jesus.

That's a massive switch.

People say they want the Acts church, but in the 2nd chapter we read that they are meeting twice a day. The Western church can barely get people to show up for a worship service one week out of three.

And that goes for the leaders as well.

We have to acknowledge the addiction at the heart of consumerism and how it affects the church as well. Discipleship is the means by which the Holy Spirit breaks the addiction...but when discipleship is optional...well...you start to see the Catch-22.

## **5. They've seen real spiritual fruit with another vehicle for discipleship and mission**

I've spent several years training and coaching leaders across the United States and Europe and here's one thing I know for sure:

There are lots of vehicles for discipleship and mission that are bearing Kingdom fruit that aren't Missional Communities!

Some people have been using the same process for decades and who am I to tell them it's not working, when, often times, it clearly is.

Bob and Mary Hopkins will often talk about how it will probably need to be a mixed economy in a local church. Meaning, while there may be one vehicle for discipleship and mission that the majority of people are using, let's not be so arrogant to say it's the only one.

Am I committed to Missional Communities? Yes. But I've seen many faithful expressions of decentralized vehicles.

For some people, they aren't really saying 'No' to leading Missional Communities, they are saying 'Yes' to another vehicle.

## **BONUS: They've operated more as a facilitator than a leader. It's a shift in understanding their role.**

We probably need to be honest about the fact that we are changing the game on many of the faithful people in our church. For a long time many of us have basically said, "Here's the vision. I'm the leader. Here's the goal. Now...can you help me execute and facilitate my vision?"

So for instance, if it was people leading small groups...they are operating as facilitators and not leaders.

But that's the system we gave them!

That's a pretty big shift and it's one we need to own. It might be one we even need to repent of in personal conversations with these leaders.

Rather than express frustration at them not stepping into this, we need to see the ways in which we've created a culture that has shaped them to respond this way.

# 7 Practical Tips for Missional Communities in the Suburbs

*Jon Dansby*

When I was asked to write about missional community in the suburbs, I was reminded why I love my missional community. Being in a MC is not always awesome or easy, but now I wouldn't trade it for the world. We've seen some great things happen.

I could go on about my community, but let me describe why I enjoy doing MC in the suburbs and explain why, in God's providence, I think it's working so well.

## **Suburbs Are Great For Mission**

First, let me say that the suburbs are a great place for a community on mission. Usually, the mission to declare and demonstrate the gospel is the missing link that ties MCs together, but suburbs are great for mission!

There are lots of reasons that this is so:

## **Suburbs are broken up into neighborhoods.**

Both community and mission happen more naturally in a defined neighborhood. This may seem obvious, but sadly it's not. You can shoehorn your calendar to make it work far away, but you'll run out of steam eventually. It's hard to get focused and passionate about reaching an undefined group of people like "all our friends at different jobs" or "people from all our different neighborhoods."

For the same reason, people don't move overseas to reach Afghanistan and then all live in different countries. Our MC's explicit mission is "to make disciples in the Brushy Creek neighborhood." We are all praying for the same faces and names. This has been life for our MC!

## **Suburbs usually have several entry points.**

Besides just being neighborly, most suburbs have several coordinated things going on. Our biggest break was when my wife began attending Bunco (also called "drunko" by the ladies) with a bunch of other neighbors. Then these saucy ladies invited her onto the Yard of the Month committee.

Suburbs do all kinds of things where you can join in (HOA, basketball, Bunco, Xmas parties, block parties, Halloween, parks, sports, pools, your own parties, etc.). As we've gotten in deeper friendships, we have a policy to never say 'no' to a neighbor.

## **Suburbs allow you to know people well enough to serve them.**

Suburbs allow you to know people well enough to serve them. There are people with needs right around you. Rather than serving at some organization over 20 minutes away, you can get to know your neighbors and serve them.

We had a single mom living across the street and as we got to know her, I saw that her yard was a constant struggle for her. I told her that her yard was now our responsibility. So our entire MC showed up and worked. She sat in our driveway sharing a drink with my wife and was blown away, unable to comprehend why we would do this.

So, get to know people. Is there a couple who hasn't had a date in over a year because they need a babysitter? A mom who needs English lessons? An elderly recluse who needs a friend? Some neighbors who are looking for a regular central hangout?

## **Practical Tips for Suburban Missional Community**

Let me talk about a few crucial practical elements have been a huge part of my MC.

### **1. Pray.**

I know, I know. This sounds like one of the Sunday school answers: "Jesus...Bible...God...pray!" But it's not. Missional Community is truly a work of the Spirit. The Spirit alone makes our testimony about

Jesus effective to the world. Jesus rebuked the disciples for their prayerlessness in working for Him against Satan's kingdom (Mk 9:29).

No less for us when we're laboring to win people out of Satan's kingdom. We must pray in a way that believes, "you do not have because you do not ask!" Ask often with names and faces in mind.

## **2. Do things differently on purpose.**

This is crucial. Somebody smart once said, "If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always gotten." You and your people won't drift toward mission any more than you naturally drift towards any other kind of difficult obedience.

In past groups, we assumed that studying the right thing would move us to obey it. It never really worked. So, we had to even talk about our MC differently from the beginning.

## **3. Cultivate community while doing mission.**

Obviously, there are at least 2 parts to missional community: mission and community (duh). So, that means that you'll have to keep your eye on both. Your community needs mission and your mission needs community. A community without mission is self-focused (and disobedient).

A mission without community is hamstrung without the community apologetic. In our MC, we spent time in my home gathering for

meals from the very beginning. At these meals, sometimes my neighbors would come by, sometimes they wouldn't. Cultivating mission and cultivating community isn't either/or, rather it's necessarily both/and.

#### **4. Mission takes years, not weeks.**

Adjust your expectations. If you're going to make a difference, you need to be in it for the long haul. This is where doing MC in the suburbs really shines because your neighbors have to ask the bank before they can go somewhere else.

You really want your unbelieving neighbors to find true friendship with your MC. That takes time!

#### **5. Move your 3rd Place to your home.**

This is something that is unique to suburbs. A Third Place needs to be neutral, natural, and regular. Your home isn't neutral or natural if you're trying to reach those at your work. In this case, a restaurant, a pub, or something else is more appropriate.

However, a home is completely neutral and natural for unbelieving neighbors. We meet in my home at least twice a month for our 3rd Place meal and it has been incredibly fruitful. We've basically fused our Third Place and our Family Meal.

## **6. Invest in hospitality!**

Spend time and spend money to get to know your neighbors. Jesus said, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mt 6:21). In the same way that you don’t really care about a stock price until you invest in it, you won’t care about hospitality until you put some time and money into it.

If you invest in this, you will want to see it flourish. Hospitality is certainly the most overlooked evangelistic discipline. Hospitality aids proclamation. Over time we’ve bought folding chairs, large folding tables, outdoor light strings, speakers for music, lots of different beverages, more plates, etc.

## **7. Don’t forget to be a community.**

I’ve talked a lot about mission, but you’ll need to invest some time with people who’ve joined your MC. Quality time requires quantity time. Do stuff on the weekends. Go eat wings, fix each other’s homes up, read the same books, take care of each other’s kids, be friends.

# Contributors

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