

“Missional Communities”
Reggie McNeal
Notes by Dave Kraft

Missional community is a different expression of church than its congregational cousin. It differs in its rhythms, celebrations, activities, and scorecard. It is church in a new way for a new day—our day—a period that can be described as the post-congregational era of Christianity. This new church life form is the missional community.

These two forces—the need to create a state religion and a clergy eager to comply—combined to centralize and institutionalize the Christian movement. The church congregationalized. This move profoundly altered its way of being in the world. Christianity became defined as a set of theological propositions rather than a way of life. These megachurches have maintained their core sense of identity as a congregation—that is, for those who attend, church is something outside of me that I belong to, that I attend or “go to,” an institution that I support.

What I am after here is opening up the discussion of missional communities so that we can begin to see that God is up to something new. I am suggesting that we expand the bandwidth of how we think church can express itself in our culture. More than one in five Americans who say they are absolutely sure about believing in God virtually never attend church, according to the research of Robert Putnam published in his recent book *American Grace* (Simon and Schuster, 2010, p. 473). This does not portend well for the future of the congregational church expression.

Sadly church as, congregation, has become very good at socializing its people away from the very mission field where God placed them. We need to reverse the trend of replacing gospel messages with church marketing.

The church did not invent the mission nor does it have exclusive rights to it. Those belong to God. Said another way, the church does not have a mission; the mission has a church. Microeconomic development and life coaching might become the primary ways the church disciples people. When we finally realize that our existence is to improve the world, and not escape it, we will grasp that the church is not the point. A kingdom-centric view of church doesn't start with its organization and worship services; it begins with organic relationships and service.

Missional followers of Jesus think of church more as a verb rather than noun. The two essential components that provide the relational Velcro for all missional communities are their defined missional focus and the intentional community life they practice. The gathering is not program-centric; it is life-centric. People are the program! Personalized coaching is available in most of the missional community cultures detailed in this book. Much of the focus of leadership training is on the personal and spiritual development of the leader. In missional communities leadership effectiveness is tied to the development of people and the competencies that are required to be an effective coach for life issues and soul nurturing.

Personal accountability is a hallmark of missional communities, not just for leaders but for everyone. Many congregations could operate several dozens to even hundreds of missional communities under the umbrella of their existing ministries. Jesus modeled a balanced missional life with the three dimensions of up (God) –in (brothers/sisters) –out (unchurched). Leaders must possess self-awareness and be committed to accountability for leading the missional community in all three dimensions.

Only a few people can occupy the intimate space of our lives. This cannot be forced and only happens at the cellular level of heart-to-heart, life-on-life engagement. This is why many models of discipleship make the case that triads and quartets are optimum for life transformations. So what is the optimum size of the missional community?

Rich Robinson says they started with twenty to fifty people in mind as their desired size. However, they found that as the group approached forty it became hard to find lay leaders who could lead in their spare time and give adequate attention to the community. They also discovered that forming and maintaining relationships become very difficult at that size. They have settled in on fifteen to twenty-five as the optimum missional community size. Bible study needs to focus on what the Spirit is saying and not be dependent on someone with a theology degree to lead it.

The goal is to release as much energy and resource into people as possible and not soak it all up with maintaining organizational needs. This approach can help prevent burnout among leaders, who typically are jazzed by engagement with people and their needs but drained by bureaucratic processes. These initiatives reflect the core convictions of a missional community theology: that the gospel creates community and must be lived out in community with those it is trying to reach.

The definition of missional community builds on our identity, expressed in four primary ways. We are children of God who live and care for each other as a

(1.) **Family**. God has always desired a people who would live in such a way that the world would know what he is like. This initial expression in the garden is reemphasized in the call of Abraham's family and eventually extended in the New Testament to all followers of Jesus, who acknowledge God as Father and live in his ways. As family we have the obligation to care for one another—both physically and spiritually. This gains expression in the covenant life we live together in community.

As (2.) **Followers** of Jesus we are also missionaries. This means we are sent by God to restore all things to himself. This sending was modeled for us in the life and mission of Jesus, who now likewise sends us into the world to live in such a way that people can see and experience what God is truly like. We live this out as a missional community.

We are also (3.) **Servants** who serve others as a way of life. Again, Jesus demonstrated what this kind of life looks like. Basically it means we do whatever needs doing whenever it's needed and wherever it leads us

Finally we are

(4.) **Learners**, disciples of Jesus who take responsibility for our own development and that of others. Part of every missional community agenda is the decision about who the community will bless and make disciples among as part of their life together in corporate service. A leadership philosophy called triperspectivalism undergirds the Soma approach to leadership recruitment, deployment, and development.

Soma Communities in Tacoma is headed by three leaders who demonstrate these roles. Jeff Vanderstelt (prophet), Abe Meysenburg (priest), and Caesar Kalinowski (king) form the nucleus of a team of elders who oversee Soma. Every person who feels inclined to form a missional community is instructed to begin by building a shared-leadership team with these three perspectives in place.

Some sample questions that each leader works through in the monthly session with an elder or coach are as follows:

Is my love for the Word growing?

Am I growing in my ability to clearly articulate the gospel in any setting?

Do I live with the confidence that God is great so I don't have to be in control?

Do I live with the confidence that God is glorious so I don't have to fear others?

Do I live with the confidence that God is good so I don't have to look elsewhere?

Do I live with the confidence that God is gracious so I don't have to prove myself?

(These last four questions are what Soma leaders refer to as the 4 Gs, adopted from author Tim Chester.)

The development of missional community leaders matches their leadership challenges, focusing on their character, capacity, and competence. This comment highlights the incredible intentionality of Soma missional community life. Church is not an add-on element to the rest of life; it is a way of life.

When they come together they ask questions of what the teaching is, what questions it raises for them, what the passage asks them to do. CRM calls this approach to scripture “obedience-based training.”

Michael “Stew” Stewart, the pastor of Missional Community:

“So the aha! moment for us,” Stew recalls, “was the realization that when we aimed for community we got neither mission nor community. But when we started to aim for mission—community that is centered around the gospel—we got mission and community.”

They decided to join in where community is already present or forming. Instead of creating alternative block parties or an alternative National Night Out, missional communities join right into the neighborhood celebrations. In countries where the gospel is exploding leaders are selected and trained while giving leadership. This differs sharply from a process of training people, then deploying them—more of a Western, academic approach. Although the whole leadership coaching process is relationally oriented, there are well-planned processes for training leaders and lots of attention is paid to skill development.

If you do missional without incarnation, you're not really doing mission; you're doing projects.” It's what “The Stone” church calls the ministry of availability.

“Just being there and being present goes a long way to answering all the strategic questions we try to answer first. You're the missionary. Find their rhythms and go join them in what they're doing and live out. Just be available. Being present and being available go a long way to being missional.”

The church focuses its interface with people through what they call the 3 Cs—

Celebrate, Connect, and Contribute.

The congregation helps people celebrate God through worship, connect with others through their small groups, and learn to contribute through service and stewardship.

Because of these tendencies leaders must possess self-awareness and be committed to accountability for leading the missional community in all three dimensions. An important strategy for balance involves building a leadership team that reflects all aspects of the fivefold gifting.

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The “Mental Model to Transformation” has three components: Radical obedience— which leads to a missional life A reflective life—where you increasingly co-create the world with God Authentic community— which leads to shared vision

Many congregations see themselves as purveyors of religious goods and services, and church members behave as consumers of religious programming.

We must make two changes in order to live missionally. We can no longer tolerate the compartmentalization of our life or the individualization of our faith.

Listen for and look for God in our everyday lives and everyday places.

We are not able to live lives of radical obedience without abiding in Jesus.

The daily practice of the spiritual disciplines offers a way to develop a reflective lifestyle. These disciplines, used by the church throughout history, are solitude, worship, prayer, fasting, study, confession, giving, and celebration.

Dabbling in these disciplines will not work. Adding these disciplines to an already overcrowded and over-busy life might produce some short-term change and heightened connection with Jesus. However, for genuine transformation to occur, these disciplines must become a way of life. Other things in our lives probably will have to be sacrificed in order to make room for these practices.

The scriptures reflect an expectation that we will not only be intimately connected with Christ, but also with each other.

As the master discipler, Jesus did not make disciples by writing a book or teaching formal classes. He created a community in which people could enjoy a relationship with him while pursuing a kingdom mission.

Participants are helped to embrace lives of radical obedience by practicing disciplines that result in a reflective life, lived out through a supporting and authentic community.

We need to overcome the compartmentalization and privatization of spirituality that has contributed to the church's ineffectiveness in our culture.

And I did argue that we need to expand the bandwidth of how we think church can be expressed in this culture, especially because the number of people susceptible to being congregationalized is dwindling.

The advent of missional communities affords us a hopeful future of releasing church from its institutional moorings, allowing it to recapture its initial expression as a street movement.

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2. A reflective life—where you increasingly co-create the world with God
3. Authentic community—which leads to shared vision

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The church as congregation has produced a high-control need among many of its leaders that might make it difficult for them to respond positively to this new outbreak of Spirit initiatives unless they are willing to reconfigure their roles.