

Ten Paradigm Shifts Toward Community Transformation – Part 1

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A small cloud is on the horizon. The winds of change are beginning to gather strength and with certainty a storm is coming...change is coming. All over our nation there is a quiet movement of the Spirit of God that is causing believers to re-examine how they “do church.” Churches around our nation are throwing out the old measures of success. It’s no longer merely about size, seeker sensitivity, spiritual gifts, church health, nor the number of small groups. It’s about making a significant and sustainable difference in the lives of people around us—in our communities and in our cities. There is a growing awareness that we cannot continue to do the same old things and expect a different result. If we want to be the salt and light we as the church were created to be we have to do something different...we have to be something different! Community transformation is not found in programs, strategies, campaigns or tactics. For most of us it will take nothing less than a shift of seismic proportions in what the church is to be in the 3rd millennium. A paradigm is a model consisting of shared assumptions regarding what works or what is true. A paradigm shift is that “aha!” moment when one sees things in such a new light that one can never go back to the old ways again. Each paradigm shift takes us from model of thinking that we must discard to a new model that we must embrace. A new paradigm is the new wineskins that will be needed to hold the new assumptions about what is true. To maximize our impact on our communities—urban, suburban or rural, we need changes in at least ten of our paradigms of how we currently view church.

1) From building walls to building bridges. “You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:13,14). The first paradigm shift pertains to how we, as the church, see ourselves in relation to our communities. Will we remain outside of the community inviting people in or will we go to our communities, seeking to be a transforming agent? The church is called to be separate in lifestyle but never called to be isolated from the people it seeks to influence. For many years founding pastor, Robert Lewis, of Fellowship Bible Church (FBC) in Little Rock was content to be growing a successful suburban mega church. By his admission, FBC was a “success church.” Success churches seek to grow by having attractive programs and offerings that people can come to and benefit from. But Robert grew increasingly dissatisfied with the impact FBC was having on the community. He made an appointment with the mayor of Little Rock and asked one question, “How can we help you?” FBC challenged themselves with the question, “What can we do that would cause people to marvel and say, ‘God is at work in a wonderful way for no one could do these things unless God were with them?’” That one question was the first step in becoming what Lewis calls a “bridge-building church.” For the past four years, they have joined with 100 other churches and over 5,000 volunteers in the Little Rock area and served their communities by building parks and playgrounds and refurbishing nearly 50 schools. They have renovated homes and provided school uniforms and winter coats for hundreds of children. They have donated hundreds of pints of blood to the Red Cross and have taught “life skill” classes (marriage, finances, wellness, aging, etc) in banks and other public forums to over 5,000 people. They have let their light shine in such a way that Jesus Christ is made real to the community. Once a church makes this mental shift regarding how it lives in its community, it is only limited by its creativity in how it can serve its community and be the salt and light it was meant to be. It makes the transition from providing ministry programs for the community to forever changing its relationship to a community.

2) From measuring attendance to measuring impact. “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast...mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough” (Matthew 13:33). In a post-modern world most people are neither impressed with the size of a church or its commitment to “truth.” Yet from the cover of TIME magazine to the front page of the Wall Street Journal, transformational community-centred ministries are grabbing the attention of the American people. Perhaps, in this century, the greatest apologetic for the reality of Jesus Christ living in a community will be observational more than propositional. To have a faith that can be observed is to be living out the truths

we want others to grasp and the life of the Saviour we want them to know. When Jesus chose one passage to describe his mission and ministry, he picked up the scroll of Isaiah and read from Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners...to comfort all who mourn and provide for those who grieve in Zion-to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair..." The way he "preached" best was by holistically combining proclaiming with comforting and providing. This is how Jesus did ministry. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14)

When Tillie Burgin started Mission Arlington, her mission was simple-take the church to the people who were not going to church-"to hang out and hover around John 3:16." As she ventured out to meet and minister to her neighbours, she was immediately challenged by Jehovah's Witnesses who told her, "You're invading our territory. Get back into your church building where you belong." Today Mission Arlington is a house church movement of nearly 250 community house churches (and nearly 4,000 in attendance) serving over 10,000 people a week in the Arlington community with food, furniture, medical and dental care, school transportation, child and adult day care, counselling, etc. What can Jesus do for a community? The people of Arlington know. Every year hundreds of people come to Christ through this transformational ministry. Lives are being touched. Lives are being changed. The church should and can make a huge difference in a community.

In Houston, Windsor Village UMC has created over 500 construction jobs and 300 regular jobs through its "Power Centre." The Power Centre serves over 9,000 families a month. Bishop Vaughn McLaughlin of Potter's House Christian Fellowship in Jacksonville is transforming his community life by life through service (innovative business and job creation, jail ministry, Christian academy, etc.) to his community. In 1999 he was named "Entrepreneur of the Year" (as a pastor!) by Florida State University. He has identified one test of the relevance of the church-"Would the community weep if your church were to pull out of the city? Would anybody notice if you left?" The question, "How big is your church?" should be replaced with "How big is the impact you are having on your community?" Every other measure is interesting but not relevant. Let's refuse to be impressed by numbers alone. Bishop McLaughlin emphatically states, "If you are not making an impact outside of your four walls, then you are not making an impact at all." There are many ways to engage the community and make an impact. The only "bad" way to engage the community in service is not to engage at all!

3) From encouraging the saints to attend the service to equipping the saints for works of service. "It is (God) who gave some to be...pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service..." (Ephesians 5:11,12) In the typical church, lay people are asked to serve in five or six capacities:

- Teach a Sunday School class
- Lead a home Bible study or small group
- Sing in the choir
- Be an usher or greeter
- Serve on a board or committee

And pastors lament that only about 20% of their members are "active." Could it be that the service opportunities are not broad enough to engage the energies and passions of people in the church? Robert Lewis noted that when people entered his church they were excited for about 4-5 years. How could they not be excited? Fellowship Bible is a teaching church and Robert is an incredible teacher. But he observes that after around five years, people get bored with church if they are not involved in ministering to others. It was not until the church began to serve their community did members find their serving niche and continue in their growth. Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City writes that the process of mobilizing members into ministers "starts by articulating clearly and regularly a theology of 'every-member ministry'...From the pulpit, in the classes, by word of mouth, it must be communicated that every layperson is a minister and that ministry is finding needs and meeting them in the goal of the spread of the kingship of Christ."

Churches like Cincinnati's Vineyard have also found that it is easier and more effective to recruit existing small groups to engage in ministry and service projects than it is to motivate, administer spiritual gift tests and recruit individuals to serve in a ministry. You can serve in most any ministry with your friends.

AMEN.