

Ten Paradigm Shifts Toward Community Transformation – Part 2

Twenty-third after Pentecost (OS33C)

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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. Last week we mentioned the first three:

1) From building walls to building bridges.

2) From measuring attendance to measuring impact.

3) From encouraging the saints to attend the service to equipping the saints for works of service.

We Continue...

4) From “serve us” to service-from inward to outward focus. “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give...” (Mark 10:45). Several years ago Chuck Colson made the observation that when the Communists took over Russia in 1917, they did not make Christianity illegal. Their constitution, in fact, did guarantee freedom of religion. But what they did make illegal was for the church to do any “good works.” No longer could the church fulfil its historic role in feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, housing the orphan, educating children or caring for the sick. What was the result? 70 years later, the church was totally irrelevant to the communities in which it dwelt. What Lenin did by diabolic design, most churches have done by default. But the result is identical. Church is irrelevant to most people.

Marion Patillo is the executive director of a ministry in Dallas called Metro-link. As the name suggests, Metro-link serves as a “conduit” between volunteers from some 40 churches and 27 city blocks in South Dallas. Marion observes that when Metro-link began, there were 955 churches in South Dallas yet the area was rife with crime, alcoholism, drug addiction and prostitution. Why? It was certainly not from the lack of churches! The problem centres on the fact that most churches had not been serving this community. It is observations like this that caused Charles Chaney, former head of Southern Baptist Home Mission Board to remark, “America will not be won to Christ by existing churches, even if they should suddenly become vibrantly and evangelistically alive. Nor will the US be won to Christ by establishing more churches like the vast majority of those we now have.” The power of the church is not merely in the number of churches but the focus of those churches.

Mary Francis Boley, is a prominent leader of women’s ministry in her Atlanta church. Hundreds of women in her church would gather each week around coffee, muffins and an open Bible. But the ministry took a radical step forward when Mary Francis decided that no Bible studies could meet unless they included a component of community service. So they scoured Atlanta for the women in the “highways and hedges” who nobody else was reaching. They identified cashiers, food service employees, hairdressers, single moms, strippers and prostitutes. Mary Francis calls her ministry, “Wellspring of Living Water.” Her purpose is to “save the women in Atlanta”-and that begins with the women who are in the pews of the church every Sunday. By ministering to “the least of these” they invite the presence of Jesus into their ministry (Matthew 25:31-46). Lives are being touched and changed.

Erwin McManus of Mosaic Church in East Los Angeles says that the single biggest factor in his church retaining people is not personal follow-up or joining a small group; it is being involved from the very beginning in service to others in the community. When members have told him that they want the church to meet their needs his reply is “You ARE the church and together we are called to meet the needs of the world.” Over 3,000 members agree. We grow and are healed as we serve others. Maybe this is what Isaiah (58:6-8) had in mind when he penned God’s words to his people: “Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen: To loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break

every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter...? Then your light will break forth like the dawn and your healing will quickly appear.” What if we settled for nothing less than 100% of our church members engaged at some level in meaningful ministry to the community? People (or small groups) could choose their field and level of engagement (from once a week to once a year), but non-involvement would not be an option.

5) From duplication of human services and ministries to partnering with existing services and ministries. “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work” (Ecclesiastes 4:9). Nearly every community has a number of human service agencies that are morally positive and spiritually neutral that are doing their best to meet the needs of the underserved and under-resourced people of the community. Such agencies include the local food bank, homeless shelter, emergency family housing, and safe houses for abused women etc. Equally true there are church and para-church ministries that are effective in ministering to specific target audiences (business community, youth, college students, etc). Rather than starting a new ministry, why not form partnerships with existing groups as “partner ministries” of a local congregation? Chances are that people from your congregation are already serving in these organizations. Why not use the current community energy to create synergy? The Bible is replete with examples of how God used secular people in partnership with his people to fulfil his purposes. Think of Joseph and Pharaoh, Nehemiah and Artaxerxes, and Esther and King Ahasuerus. Instead of each congregation having its own food pantry, why not partner with the local community food bank? When needy people request food, congregations could refer these folks to their “partner ministry.” In our community Big Brothers has 200 boys on a list waiting for an older mentor yet how many churches do you know that are saying, “One of these days we’d like to begin a youth mentoring program.” Why not form a partnership with Big Brothers? Let Big Brothers shoulder the cost and liability for screening applicants. Pioneering churches like Bear Valley Church in Denver and Highland Park Presbyterian Church of Dallas have done a great job of partnering with what already exists. There is no reason to form a duplicate ministry if the service or ministry already exists and is effective in accomplishing its mission. Imagine how great it would be if your church bulletin included not only the men’s and women’s Bible study times but also a list of 20-30 “Community Partner Ministries” as well. Maybe we can effectively love our city with the love of Jesus Christ through agencies and mechanisms that already exist! Most human service agencies need what the church could readily supply--caring volunteers, financial support and even facilities. We form partnerships not around theology but around our common concern for the city.

6) From fellowship to functional unity. There is a strong case to suggest that there is really only one church in a city or community (made up of all believers) that meets in several congregations around the city. In Philippians 2:2 Paul implored, “...make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.” Only unity of purpose around the vision of a transformed community is strong enough to unite pastors and churches of different denominations. Jack Dennison of CitiReach writes, “While solid relationships form the basis for unity, we can’t stop there. My observation in city after city is that oftentimes unity becomes an end in itself. So we see repetitive efforts to demonstrate our unity through citywide worship events, prayer vigils...and other similar events. These activities...are wonderful symbols of our unity but they rarely produce real substance. They make us feel good and sometimes result in great newspaper coverage, but the cities remain unchanged.” Uniting the church around a common goal is preferable to trying to unite the church around a cooperative project. We align ourselves “in unity to pursue the same goals for our community while each participant determines the part it should play.” Functional unity does not exclude cooperative efforts but functional unity also implies that each church can act with a degree of sanctified independence, not waiting for permission from others to serve the community, as long as it is working toward the agreed upon vision of a healthy, transformed community. Cities like Fresno, Houston, Pittsburgh, Jacksonville, Little Rock, New York City and several others are being changed because the church is coming together around a common vision for what the city can become through significant ministry and service.

AMEN.