

Ten Paradigm Shifts Toward Community Transformation – Part 3

Christ the King (OS34C)

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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. Over the past two weeks, we :

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.

4) From “serve us” to service-from inward to outward focus.

5) From duplication of human services and ministries to partnering with existing services and ministries.

6) From fellowship to functional unity.

7. From Condemning the City to Blessing the City and Praying For It. Jeremiah 29 begins by saying; “This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem...to those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.” What follows are instructions on how to live as aliens in a foreign land. Listen to his admonition: “Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (v. 7)

For too long we as the church have positioned ourselves as adversaries to our communities. The monolithic church has stood from afar and lobbed in pontifical salvos condemning the city and those who are trying to serve it. Maybe it is time we began blessing the city by blessing those who have given themselves to the city! Pastors in our Colorado community have begun inviting city officials and influencers to their monthly lunches. The Mayor, the Chief of Police, District Attorney, editor of the newspaper, the university president, and others have spoken to this ministerial alliance. After these guests address the gathering they are prayed over and the ministers thank God for these folks and ask Him to bless these city servants (1 Timothy 2:1-4). Anyone can curse the city but pastors are in a unique position to really “bless” a city and her people. Each year the church in Little Rock has honored a different group of servants—the police, firefighters, schoolteachers, etc at their annual “Share Fest.” This past year Pastor Adam Hamilton of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection (COR) passed out the names of every teacher, administrator and employee of the Kansas City School District—one for every one of the 5,700 people in attendance. Each person was asked to pray regularly for that person and send a card of encouragement and appreciation. The response was overwhelming! From that one strategic blessing scores and scores of COR members are now volunteering and tutoring the children of Kansas City...and are transforming the city. Perhaps the next great reconciliation movement will be between the church and the community.

We not only need to bless our communities but we need to pray for them as well. The extent that we will impact our communities will be proportionate to how effectively each influential segment of our community (educators, business, law enforcement, arts, civic leaders, human service agencies, etc.) are being prayed for. 230 congregations in Jacksonville are praying daily for every one of the police force through their “Adopt-a-Cop” ministry. Twice a year in Little Rock over a thousand people come together to intercede on behalf of the city. In Houston, Doug Stringer of Turning Point Ministries (“Somebody Cares Houston”) writes that over 75% of Houston’s 2,700 square miles are now covered by daily prayer by the church in Houston. It’s hard to be adversaries with those you pray God’s blessings on. All over our nation, through organized efforts like Concerts of Prayer and Mission America’s Lighthouses of Prayer

movement, walls are coming down. Individuals and communities are being prayed for. The church is being reconciled to the community.

8. From Being a Minister in a Congregation to Being a Minister in a Parish. “As Jesus approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it . . .” (Luke 19:41). A congregation is made up of people who attend a local church from a community. The minister typically feels that this congregation is his flock whom he must baptize, marry and bury. They consume his time and energy. Being in a parish is different. A parish differs from a congregation in that it is a geographical scope of concern and responsibility. A congregation is a subset of a parish. So what difference does that make? Being in a parish gives one the God-given right to minister to anyone in the community, whether they are part of one’s congregation or not. Urban theologian, Ray Bakke, illuminates this point by writing that every minister has two functions; 1) to be pastor to the members and 2) chaplain to the community. Rich is a pastor of a small church in our city. His congregation is 70 but his parish is over 90,000! Rich sits comfortably serving between the human service community and the faith community. Rich’s office is the local coffee shop. His tools are his cell phone and his laptop. Rich is the person God has used to connect our community leaders to our monthly ministerial alliance meetings. His days are often filled with walking through our city and interceding for it. Isaiah 61:1-6 describes the reward of those who “rebuild...restore...(and) renew” the city. It is the city who bestows on them their titles – “And you will be called priests of the Lord, you will be named ministers of our God” (Isaiah 61:6)

9. From Anecdote and Speculation to Valid Information. Two pieces of information changed the course of Nehemiah’s life that resulted in the transformation of a community. In Nehemiah 1, Nehemiah learned that the walls and gates of Jerusalem were broken down and her people were in great distress. These two pieces of accurate information were catalytic to Nehemiah’s prayers and plans to restore a broken wall and a broken people. His burden to transform the city came from accurate information. We too need correct information about the real needs of our community as well as the resources we have to meet these needs. Do we know the demographic information of our community? Do we know the number of churches? Do we know the spiritual history of our community? Ray Bakke writes that in assessing community needs we need to identify the people in need (poor, disadvantaged, children, elderly, single parents, disabled, prisoners, sick, aliens, etc) along with the type of needs they have (physical, spiritual / moral, social, emotional or cognitive). Most information is readily available through local human service agencies and the census bureau. We also need to identify the spiritual assets of our community—the number of faith communities and believers. Together, these two research pieces give us a picture of our “mission field” and our “mission force.” Armed with accurate information, we can determine best how to go forward. In 1994, 21 year-old Pastor Matthew Barnett began the Los Angeles “Dream Center” by walking around his neighborhood looking for unmet needs. He saw the thousands of outcast people living on the fringes of society. Today the Dream Center — “the church that never sleeps” has adopted 50 city blocks (2,100 homes!) that it serves with 200 volunteer staff. Its Franciscan Hospital campus houses 400 people in its rehab and discipleship program and feeds more than 25,000 people a week. They have a free 24-hour medical clinic, a mobile medical unit and dozens of effective ministries that are finding needs and meeting them. Scores of churches around our country have adopted the Adopt a Block strategy as a means of touching the lives of people around them.

In Boulder, Colorado, the pastors realized that they knew very little about the other agencies that were serving our community. They decided to organize a one day “Magic Bus Tour” to meet with the directors of these agencies, to find out what they did and what help they needed. They visited the local shelter, the food bank, a day-care facility, a health clinic, a home for runaway youth, the AIDS project, etc—a total of eight agencies. It was the beginning of bridge-building relationships between the faith community and the community where new openness, healing and friendships have begun. Our pastors are now ministering to AIDS patients and utilizing their churches for overflow nights in partnership with the homeless shelter. One pastor, who is now taking meals to AIDS patients on a weekly basis, was drawn into this ministry by two things—“This was a group of people who were in need of the grace of God and also the group I was most uncomfortable with, so I just thought it was something God wanted me to be a part of. If anything, this ministry is changing my life.”

10. From Teacher to Learner. “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak . . .” (James 1:19). It is interesting to note that for the historic African-American churches, the concept of holistic ministry is not a new concept. They have never suffered from trying to split effective evangelism from social justice or meeting the needs of those around them. It’s how they’ve always done church. A study of 2,150 black

churches by C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya in their book *The Black Church in the African American Experience* report that nearly 70% “of black churches are involved with social service agencies and non-church programs in dealing with community problems.” The effective churches see the community as one that is full of assets more than full of problems. Churches in New York City like Concord Baptist Church of Christ, Allen AME, Bethel Gospel Assembly to those in Los Angeles like First AME, Faithful Central Bible Church and West Angeles COGIC have led the way in transforming and preserving their communities. John DiIulio, former Director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, sites a study of over 400 of the roughly 2,000 community-serving congregations in Philadelphia:

- a. Over 90 percent of urban congregations provide social services, from preschools to prison ministries, from food pantries to health clinics, from literacy programs to day-care centers, etc.
- b. The replacement value of their services in Philadelphia alone is a very conservatively estimated quarter-billion dollars a year.

Suburban congregations have much to learn from these innovative leaders and ministries.

Where do we go from here?

From Isaiah 65:17-25 Ray Bakke outlines seven characteristics of a healthy community from the heart of God:

- a. Public celebration and happiness (18, 19)
- b. Public health for children and the aged (20)
- c. Housing for all (21)
- d. Food for all (22)
- e. Meaningful work (22, 23)
- f. Family support systems (23)
- g. Absence of violence (25)

This list outlines our potential marching orders. The Spirit of God is at work. There is a good chance that the next great movement of God will involve putting the church back into community where it can be the leaven, salt and light God designed the church to be. Will we join God in this transforming work? For the sake of the gospel, the church and our communities, in faith... let's move forward!

What are the next steps for you?

- a. Which paradigms do you readily identify with? Which principles or illustrations speak to you most strongly?
- b. How would you answer the question, “Tell me about the impact your church is having on your community?”
- c. Define your “growth model” for individuals? Can those in your church grow significantly apart from service? Why or why not?
- d. What are some natural ways you can begin building bridges into your community?
- e. Where is the “low-hanging fruit” for your church?
- f. Where do you sense is your first (or next) entry point into your community?
- g. What are the internal / external barriers to entering into the life of your community?
- h. What human service agencies would make natural “partner ministries” for your church?
- i. How can you begin expressing “unity of purpose” with others in the faith community?
- j. What are some ways that you can “bless” your city?
- k. How can you begin to get good information about your community’s “mission field” and “mission force?”
- l. Discuss the “Ten Paradigm Shifts” with your staff / board at your next leadership retreat

AMEN.