

Ten Paradigm Shifts Toward Community Transformation

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 where 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-centered 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 Savior 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 neighbors, 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, counseling, 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 Center.” The Power Center 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.

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 Russian 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 fulfill 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 centers 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 parachurch 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 fulfill 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.

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 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 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.

In 1994, 21 year-old Pastor Matthew Barnett began the Los Angeles "Dream Center" by walking around his neighborhood looking for unmet needs. 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 program and feeds more than 25,000 people a week. They have 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 Dream Center strategy as a means of touching the lives of people around them.

In our town, 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, and 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.

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. 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 Dilulio, 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:

--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.

--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 six characteristics of a healthy community from the heart of God: Public celebration and happiness (18, 19), public health for children and the aged (20), housing for all (21), food for all (22), family support systems (23) and 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!

Scriptural Resources. For further study:

Exodus 16:49, 22:21,

Leviticus 19:19, 25:35

Psalms 41:1, 68:5

Proverbs 3:28, 14:31, 19:17

Isaiah 58, 61

Matthew 25:31-46

James 2:14-17

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