

“A Big Blue Ocean Strategy”

By Bill Ferguson, State Youth Pastor & Coach

“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” (John 20:21, NIV)

About 3 years ago, I began paying attention to some inner dissonance that I had been experiencing in ministry. Sometimes, the Holy Spirit speaks to me through dissonance. I felt like a “fish out of water” or at least a fish that was not satisfied with swimming exclusively in the “aquarium” of the church. To make a long story short, this led me in 2008 to begin venturing into organic and incarnational models of ministry and church life in Miami. In this time, I have asked many questions, considered new ideas, revisited scriptural principles and the words of our Lord ... all of this and more, in order to think deeply and strategically about being a person sent to engage culture outside the church for Christ. I’ve found a “big blue ocean” of people in my community and city disconnected from Christ and the community of faith. Frankly, I was not trained to be in culture. I was trained to be in the church. Much of what I was taught to do in the church is disengaged with the wider culture. When you find yourself in a situation like mine, you need to develop a different way of thinking and acting as a person of faith, as a pastoral leader and as a church to reach the big, blue ocean. If you feel this dissonance, then maybe what I share will help you think deeply about ministry in your community.

After 23 years in pastoral ministry, I have come to see that the conventional pattern of church and pastoral ministry is often about taking care of the church “aquarium” rather than engaging the big ocean of culture. This is not necessarily good; it is just reality. Church conflicts, in my experience, have most often been about life “in the tank,” rather than about problems of engaging the big blue ocean of culture with the love of Christ. Consequently, pastors (including myself) have become experts on “life in the tank” and they focus much of their time and attention there. If you will further indulge me in this aquarium metaphor, the pastoral or caretaker’s job description looks something like this: a) Attract and welcome new fish to the tank, b) Create programs to “school” new and old fish in the ways of the tank (couldn’t resist the pun!), c) Inspire, encourage or admonish those in the tank to swim lovingly together, d) Provide good food and appropriate feeding mechanisms, e) Monitor the tank for adequate size and comfort for those who want to be there, and, *if there is time*, f) Get out into the big blue ocean. It’s a big job with high expectations and many challenges.

As a caretaker of “church aquariums” in Indiana, Washington, D.C., and Miami, there have been many times when I have asked, “Is this what ministry is all about?” or, “Is this all there is?” Dr. Greg Wiens touched on the “something more” that is out there, when he published an article several years ago about the percentage of the population in Florida that is “churched.” It was not good news. Basically, the percentages ranged from 14% to almost 20% statewide. SE Florida, where I serve, was listed at 14% for church attendance.

I began looking at our church practices, my pastoral expectations of members and myself, as well as how and where we spent our time and money. It became obvious to me that if other churches were similar in their approach (and they are) that our culture was going untouched by the church on the whole. I knew that the Lord had sent me as a believer and called me to send others, as a pastor, but most of our time (mine and those in churches I pastored) was spent on ourselves. I began asking some important questions that lead me to begin working on my “Big Blue Ocean Strategy.” My responses to these questions have led me to work on planting an organic network of

faith communities (sometimes called “house churches”) in neighborhoods in Miami. My responses to these questions have led me, as a follower of Christ and as a leader in the church, to focus less on creating programs, services and events that attempt to attract un-churched people to a campus or a service, toward a strategy of developing loving communities of disciples whose primary activity is to engage people --- spiritually interested, relationally open, but disoriented in their world --- where they live. I don’t claim to have the strategy all worked out and running well. I feel like I, and the communities of faith associated with our network, are simply trying to learn how to swim outside the church tank!! It’s a big and unfamiliar blue ocean that God created and loves. We’re determined to engage it!

For me, the issue is not whether you agree with my strategy or take on the model I am working to develop. That is not my purpose here. Rather, it is important to think deeply and honestly as a follower of Christ and/or as a leader in the church about being “sent.” I want to leave you with some important questions about which I have been thinking, that I believe God’s Spirit can use to lead you and your ministry beyond the “church tank” into the big ocean of your culture for Christ.

1) What percentage of the population in your community is disconnected from Christ and a faith community? How do you plan to bridge the gap with those who aren’t interested in taking the first step to come to you or your church?

2) Do you feel that people in your city or sphere of influence are waiting for your church to be run better, or for your campus to look prettier, or for what you offer to be more contemporary, high tech or “full-serviced,” in order to connect with your church, so that they can experience the love of Christ through you?

3) Is it the responsibility of those in your community who are not connected with Christ or the church to be attracted to your services and programs in order to experience the love of Christ and be involved with a faith community? What church activities are you willing to stop doing in order to go to those in your community on a consistent basis (I’m not talking about episodic drive-by connections for Jesus)?

4) Are you willing to let people in your faith community spend their time for ministry outside the church walls and outside its programs, in order to engage, live with, bless and serve people who are not connected to Christ or the church?

If you would like to interact and discuss these thoughts further, please email me at billf@flcog.org.

Next week’s article: “God with Skin On” -Incarnational Living and Ministry

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