

“God with Skin On”
Incarnational Living and Ministry

***“The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood ...
Generous inside and out, true from start to finish.”***
– John 1:14 (The Message)

Last week, I spoke of developing a strategy to connect with people in culture who (in large measure) are disconnected with Christ and the Church. I called it a “Big, Blue Ocean Strategy” because it is a move to swim outside the “church aquarium.” I don’t want to be misunderstood in promoting this strategy. I don’t want to see the Church dismantled or left vacant! I love the Church. I am a product of her influence and impact. My life has been (and continues to be) transformed by her message of Christ’s love most effectively expressed to me through caring believers. Here’s the rub for me ... We spend so much time these days participating in the schedule of the Church and maintaining the organization of the Church that we (pastoral staff and congregational members) have very little time to develop relationships outside it that express the transforming love of Christ with those who have not experienced it.

We have often called those disconnected from Christ and a faith community “the lost” - a term that has carried a negative connotation. In his book, *More Ready Than You Realize*, Brian McLaren gives a reminder that the ancient term “lost,” meant “highly treasured, worth looking for, but just missing.” Isn’t this why Jesus “moved into the neighborhood?” Isn’t this why Jesus called those who believed in him and lived out his way to “Go” into their neighborhoods? The world needed to be found by “God with skin on” – God who would love them to life! Honestly, the world is no different today.

I love the story of the parent tucking her young daughter into bed for the night. After singing her a lullaby, she gets up to leave the room. Her little daughter cries out, “Please stay, mommy. I don’t want to be left alone in the dark.” Her mother replies, “You won’t be alone, sweetheart, God is always with you.” “But mommy,” the child says, “what I want right now is God with skin on!” This little girl wanted a tangible relationship, not a concept or belief system.

What’s happening in my neighborhood? In the past couple of years, I have heard screaming coming from a neighbor’s house between a husband and wife, or a parent and son. I have seen a man working in his yard, on his car; on his house ... he doesn’t have a job and needs something to do. I have become aware of another neighbor with cancer, whose wife is struggling to take care of the kids and hold it all together. I have listened to a teenager concerned about a grandmother who had just had a stroke. I’ve seen my next-door neighbor struggle for months with the frustration of a broken lawn mower and the inability to repair it. Great or small, needs are present everywhere I look.

I, too, have been in some of these confusing, disorienting places or in others with different kinds of pain. I know what it is like to need a friend who is “God with skin on.” Thankfully, I have had believing church friends to support me. What do people do if they don’t have supportive Christian friends they can trust? What if they don’t know or aren’t interested in going to a church to find help? What if they need someone to come to them – *get to know them* -- so that Christ can move into their neighborhood in the flesh?

Please hear me correctly. If you are passionate about telling others about your church or the message of Christ, I think that is great! My concern is that if we are going to reach people in our culture with the gospel, we are going to have to get to know people, on their turf, by being more incarnational than institutional. It may take freeing up time for the Church (followers of Christ) to consistently love ordinary, everyday neighbors or workplace people on a consistent basis. We might need to befriend, eat together, watch a ball game with, share a meal, give a casserole, sit and ponder with, cry with, play together or just waste time with those who live closest to us who are disconnected with Christ and the Church. Maybe then they will listen to what we have to

say about Jesus and want to join us in a faith community. This is not easy. It takes a long time. It is not a microwave thing. It is a key to the “Big, Blue Ocean Strategy.”

Let me ask a couple of hard questions related to living and ministering incarnationally:

1) Are those who are “lost” highly treasured, worth looking for and seen as just missing to you?

2) Do you have time in your schedule personally (as believers) and corporately (as the church) to spend in your neighborhood or your community developing relationships with those who need to experience “God with skin on” through you?

Note: Studies suggest that in most places in our state, 70% - 80% of the population is not going to cross the threshold of the church to find this.

3) What might it look like for your church, your families, your business people, your teens, and your seniors to live incarnationally with those who are lost in your neighborhoods?

4) What might happen if pastoral staff members were required over the next year to spend 20% of their time outside the church developing relationships with those who are “lost” in their neighborhood or community?

Note: You can’t teach what you don’t know or do yourself.

5) What might happen if members of your congregation were to give 20% of their time allotted to “church” making friends with their neighbors 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: “Creating Communities of Faith and Belonging”