

“Creating Communities of Belonging and Acceptance”

“Church should be what ends up happening as a natural response to people wanting to follow us, be with us, and be like us, as we follow the way of Christ.”

– Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom: Creating Incarnational Communities*

I’ve enjoyed interacting with Rev. Fontaine Green about the ideas I have presented in this series so far. I want to include some thoughts he shared with me about one of the groups in the church he served with in Orlando. The impact and inspiration of this community of love, belonging and acceptance is a great example of the importance of incarnational communities for the church. Rev. Green wrote:

I had to honestly evaluate our effectiveness to the unchurched. Our weekly gathering required a lot of energy, finances, etc. - and what was the fruit of that to the unchurched? I came to the conclusion that our most effective ministry was taking place in a home group that was really being community and reaching out to others. This lean - mean group was reaching the addicted, and the lost and most resembled Acts 2 stuff!

I remember going one night unannounced and they had a new person attending who had destroyed his teeth due to an addiction to crack. The group spontaneously collected a \$700 offering and secured a dentist for treatment! On another occasion they collected a \$1,000 offering to do car repairs for a young couple in need. All of this was happening on their own - no committee meetings, no requests for "giving credit" - just the "Church Unleashed" meeting needs that they became aware of! These examples were so encouraging to me as the pastor.

Let me ask a few questions to get you thinking:

- 1) What might happen through our churches if we commissioned followers of Christ to go out in groups of 2 or 3 (individuals, couples, families, friends who live, work or play in close proximity to each other) to engage people disconnected with Christ and the church in their community, work place or neighborhood?
- 2) What if we extended to our “missional people” the freedom to engage others without the pressure of immediately inviting them to attend services at our church?

Incarnational engagement and life leads to developing faith communities of love and acceptance. They can also happen through small groups that are moved to bless and journey with those in their sphere of influence in the love of Christ.

I see Jesus leading his disciples in a similar process of engagement to develop the church. In fact, he was so engaged in this way that they called him a “friend of sinners!” Look what happened when Jesus befriended Zacheus, ate in his home. Zacheus gave back what he stole from people in his community four-fold! He experienced acceptance and belonging and was transformed. This leads me to say, “Belonging leads to believing” rather than “Believing leads to belonging.” Herein lies the importance of faith communities today!

Imagine what would happen if this idea took hold in your church and there were more people connecting (at least initially) in faith communities off campus than there were people attending services on campus? What a great thought! I want to share more about this in my last article of this series titled, “A Measure and A Vision for A Church Immersed in Culture.”

If this approach produces some tension in you, you’re in good company. I have felt it, too! I must admit that in my anxiety to resolve some of my tension in congregational ministry, I have rushed to quickly get those being reached into the church (which was full of unfamiliar people to them). How difficult this must have been for them to build relationships with those they didn’t know, especially with members who already had a full set of friends, or lived too far from the new person to share life and a spiritual journey day-to-day, or just weren’t interested?

Today, I see things from the vantage point of the house church I lead in our neighborhood. I’m confident that it is a place that anyone can enter with or without faith and be loved and accepted in their journey with us. I enjoy the process of getting to know the friends of those who are a part of this non-traditional community of faith. I feel enriched when I can partner with someone to engage one of their friends who has need of support, service or resourcing. I’m thrilled when a friend of one of our group is ready to enter our community of faith after having been touched in this process. Is this something that happens only in house churches? Of course not. I’m confident that it happens in many places and in many ways across the Church.

What do you think of this approach? Is this a part of your intentional strategy to reach the “big, blue ocean” around your church?

Next week: Action & Reflection Discipleship

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