

Dr. Neil David Tibbott

Theological Concepts for Engaging Culture



*This paper is an excerpt from the original
work titled “Modalities of Engagement:
A Process Approach to Community
Development”*

ABSTRACT

The Modalities of Engagement research project was written in partial fulfillment of the Doctor of Ministry program at the Northwest Graduate School in Seattle. The research project helped develop a process approach to organizing community development projects. The modalities provide a practical framework for teams engaging in highly doable, low entry, street level community development projects called Neighborhood Initiative. The unabridged research project showed how the modalities were developed, how they are practiced and ways actual ministries have used them to impact their cities.

The objective of the research was to create labels to describe a process that would be transferable in both a faith based context and a non-sectarian institutional context whether the organization was educational, business or social service oriented. The research methodology utilized theological and cultural research to identify common issues related to the nature of community development projects in the Christian tradition. Further bibliographic research sought to identify trends and activities in contemporary culture. Finally, field research with community development activists helped identify highly doable, extremely local ministries, which were making a difference in the neighborhoods they serve.

The research concluded with a community development framework organized around four major objectives: Meet People, Find Resources, Form a Team and Start a Project. The framework serves as an organizing grid for explanations and case studies that demonstrate how to launch Neighborhood Initiatives in a variety of contexts.



BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL THEMES

Overview of Themes

This section of the study reviews scholarly treatments of the nature of mission of the church in the world. The theme of the missions is rather comprehensive both from the scriptural record in the Old and New Testaments as well as the history of the church. For the purposes of this research an overview of this theme will be given from three different perspectives. The first will be from contemporary mission practice in an urban context. This representation will be primarily provided by two authors Robert C. Linthicum and John Perkins.

The more theoretical overview will be summarized from works produced by Darrel Guder and associates along with Ronald Sider. Finally, an historical overview will be summarized from the work of David Bosch, the late British theologian, who wrote extensively on the mission of the church as it is articulated in the Bible and understood by the church from an historic and contemporary perspective.

Cities and Christian Community Development

Two works by Robert Linthicum were consulted for this project, *City of God*, *City of Satan* and his other more recent work *Transforming Power*. The first book captures the essence of Linthicum's lectures given in a various places around the world to equip pastors to see their ministries in the context of the city, "God's primary abode" (Linthicum 1991, 33). Linthicum articulates both God's prevailing love for cities and the systemic presence of evil. In the context of the urban maze God's heart for people is richly exposed and his power graphically displayed. For this reason Linthicum argues for Christian leaders and churches to take up the charge to engage in ministry in the city.

He provides a helpful overview of the systems at work in cities in his chapter

titled “Our City as the Abode of Personal and Systemic Evil”. He writes,

The primary systems of a city are the economic, political, and religious institutions. These systems constantly interact and cooperate with one another, thereby forming either holy alliances or an unholy trinity. The systems have the potential to work for justice and economic equality for the people and wise stewardship of a city’s resources if their functioning is based on both corporate and individual relationship with God (Linthicum 1991, 62).

Linthicum goes on to explain that the same forces that corrupt individuals serve to corrupt cities. In addition to the sinful tendencies of the flesh there are also powers and principalities, which are described as the “demonic dimensions of a city’s systems” (Linthicum 1991, 63).

There is good news for the city too. One of the systems listed above is religion and for Christians, the church. The church is the primary means by which the Good News is communicated in the world. Jesus proclaimed the Gospel of His Kingdom, saying “the Kingdom of God is near.” (Mark 1:15) The pervasive understanding of this message is that the power of the Kingdom to transform individuals and other Kingdoms is now present. Linthicum says, “The Kingdom of God is the primary paradigm for understanding God’s call to the church in the city.” (Linthicum 1991, 105)

This is the underlying question facing the church in the city. How far has the Kingdom of God become embodied and made real in the city’s people of God? God’s primary intention for the city is to bring God’s structures, to transform the lives of its inhabitants, to exorcise evil and unrepentant principalities and power, and to place over that city, not a brooding angel but Christ who would gather the city to himself. It is God’s intention to transform every city into the city of God by making of that city the embodiment of God’s rule (Linthicum 1991, 105).

In the book by John Perkins, *Beyond Charity*, there is a remarkable statement about the necessity of establishing churches in the city. Perkins summarizes his belief this

way,



The parachurch in America has developed many excellent programs, and I am very thankful for the work of many parachurch community development ministries. However, a Christian witness in the inner city (or anywhere), whether through a parachurch or a business enterprise, must be rooted in a worshiping fellowship of believers in a local church (Perkins 1993, 53).

He further explains what a local church accomplishes when it is resident in a city.

He summarizes his observations this way,

Only relationships within the community of the local church can most fully:

1. Absorb Pain
2. Proclaim hope
3. Point to God's authority
4. Bring people together
5. Spend lavishly
6. Reflect God's character
7. Protect the vulnerable (Perkins 1993, 53)

In a very practical way the transformation of personal lives and the systemic evils of the city are addressed in a very simple solution, the establishment of local churches; but not just any kind of church, they must live out the message of the Kingdom of God and invite others to join God in his redemptive strategy.

One warning that Perkins articulates and is worth mentioning in this section on a practical theology of mission is the tendency to view the city through one particular brand of theology in the exclusion to others. He warns,

Today the church is divided among these three theologies: European theology, black theology, and liberation theology. The problems in today's church reflect this division along theological lines. The white suburban church in America today has largely failed to answer the call of God for justice for the poor and oppressed (Perkins 1993, 53).

While this statement may be over simplified, it is eloquent in the admission that systems of theology tend to fail the church over time. Whether the system is European theology, which rode the rising strength of the Enlightenment to the development of the modern church, or black theology, which was born in the struggle to reconcile Christianity and slavery, both are inadequate. Mission projects increase the strength of their ministries by admitting the fallibilities of their theology.

In considering the theological basis for mission in the city, the church must embrace a realistic view of the personal and systemic sin of the city and the power of the Kingdom of God to confront those sins. Yet, a realistic appraisal of the church requires rigorous critique of the theology that tends to divide people along racial and socio economic lines. If cities and by way of extrapolation, neighborhoods, are to be transformed, it will be by actually living out the ideals of the Kingdom in radically new ways.

Perhaps the church will become the vessel for declaring the message of the Kingdom by first practicing the message of the Kingdom more faithfully. What better place to start than with simple, highly doable projects that illustrate God's present redemption in the city.

The Gospel of the Kingdom Applied to Mission

So what is the Gospel? Would anyone notice a manifestation of the Kingdom of God if they saw it? George Hunsberger summarizes seven obvious signs of the Gospel this way:

In light of God's mission that defines and guides ours, in light of the Gospel we have received in the scriptures that makes us God's people and joins us to God's mission, and in light of our understanding of the context of our mission in the present

time, we discern especially these aspects of the Gospel which are the good news for us and our world. It is good news that:

- ... in Jesus Christ God has taken on our humanity.
- ... in Jesus Christ God heals the world's brokenness.
- ... in Jesus Christ God intends the abundance of life.
- ... in Jesus Christ God becomes known.
- ... in Jesus Christ God grants forgiveness and the power of reconciliation.
- ... in Jesus Christ God extends the mercy and compassion of divine rule.
- ... in Jesus Christ God gives hope for the world (Hunsberger 1998).

Hunsberger summarizes the holistic nature of what the Gospel of the Kingdom accomplishes. It is not enough to say that an individual's sin is forgiven, nor is it adequate for the church to simply stand as a rescue station for the "lost and hurting." Far from an isolated message spoken in words only, the Gospel involves transformation, it demands obedience, and it compels acts of reconciliation. Yet, the Gospel is not delivered via a nameless courier, but rather the person of Christ. God's methodology for introducing the Gospel is highly relational.

Amplifying this theme of the relational aspects of Gospel proclamation is the work started by the collaborators of the *Missional Church* one of whom is George Hunsberger, cited above and whose works were edited by Darrel Guder from the Gospel Our Culture Network. In their collected work they articulate the unique opportunity of the church to speak prophetically in her host culture. They say,

The church as an alternative community can make a powerful witness when it chooses to live differently from the dominant society even at just a few key points. An important task of the church is to discern what are those key points at which to be different from the evil of the world. For some, the key point will be authentic community in the face of the Individualism of the dominant culture. For others, that point will be community of goods in the face of the power of the profit motive. For

others, that point will be a reminder of God's redeeming love for all, no matter what crimes they have committed, in the face of calls for the death penalty. The communions that emerged from the Radical Reformation have much to say to the entire church about the importance and implication of such witness.

To discern those points of dissent is to be a Missional church. Indeed, given cultures' tendency to demand ultimate allegiance to one or more of their powers, some kinds of dissent is required if the church is to be genuinely missionary to the dominant culture. The church must be different from its surroundings in order to make visible and witness faithfully to the in breaking reign of God (Guder 1998, 127-128).

The authors go on to summarize the price that Christians have paid in the past for standing in opposition to their dominant culture. Yet it is the actual activity of taking a stand that amplifies the proclamation of the Gospel with deeds. Furthermore, they say that "the willingness of Christians to suffer is Missional." (Guder 1998, 131)

Inspiring Christians to suffer and articulating the values that sustain them will be leaders with a unique ability to articulate God's passions. Leaders in the missional church will be characterized by their intimacy with God, not just their knowledge of theology. Their ministries will manifest the presence of God, not just the science about God. The *Missional Church* summarizes this point in the following way,

Therefore missional leadership requires a spirituality that lives in close relationship with and reliance on the directions of the father through the Spirit. The practice of regular spiritual disciplines (the ecclesial practices) is essential for such a life in Christ's footsteps (Guder 1998, 186).

One of the shaping influences for missional leaders will be a recovery of the doctrine regarding eschatology. This is not a minor point in light of the contemporary interest in world events and the possibility of seeing the fulfillment of apocalyptic literature in our time. Popular renditions of these events characterized in the *Left Behind* series by La Haye and Jenkins tends to skew the conversation toward a very narrow band

•
•
•
•
•
•

of human history with a particular theological position. Rather, leaders who press into a more complete understanding of God's dawning reign and coming Kingdom have a message of hope that stimulates the church to endure in the midst of adversity. Much of what the North American church suffers today is not the persecution experienced in the first centuries of Christianity; rather it is the malaise that fogs one's convictions when persecution is not present. Guder, et al write,

Eschatology is not only about the end of the world. It is about the future breaking in today with an alternative order known as the reign of God. The announcement of Jesus that in this coming the Kingdom of God had drawn near (Mark 1:14-15) was a declaration that God's future – eschaton - was present in the world (Guder 1998, 187).

This aspect of leadership is essential when we return to the conversation about the modalities of engagement that leaders and team will be challenged to remain intentional in the midst of their StreetGospel projects. Whether persecution or simple loss of focus threatens the intentional progress of the project, leadership must embrace the reality that God's Kingdom is dawning and will come despite present hardships.

(Our family is presently challenging the library system in our city to remove certain objectionable materials from their teen library collection. While an argument could be made to remove the literature all together, we are asking them to relocate it to an adult section. We have invited neighbors to join the request to relocate the materials so that our voice is not the only one. It sometimes seems like a trivial issue to pursue, but this project highlights the desire of a neighborhood to protect certain citizens, namely teenagers from what appears to be systemic sin, that is the blind assignment of certain reading materials to a specific age group based on the recommendation of an editorial team, rather than the actual content of the periodical. We suspect the library system and

editorial team has not reviewed the literature recently and would be surprised to find what the system is exposing teenagers to consider.)

Finally, one more voice summarizing a theology of mission from the perspective of the Kingdom of God is Ron Sider, president of Evangelicals for Social Action and professor of theology and culture at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary. In his book *Good News and Good Works* he describes four divergent models for articulating the Gospel and cooperating with God in His redemption process in the world.

The first is Individualistic Evangelical which emphasizes personal sin and personal transformation. The second is Radical Anabaptist which acknowledges social sin, but still emphasizes personal responsibility for sin. Transformation is facilitated through demonstrations of a redeemed community. The third model is what Sider calls Dominant Ecumenical which acknowledges personal and social aspects of sin, but the fault lies heavily on the social order of the culture. Transformation occurs through the church and political activities in society. Finally, the fourth model, Secular Christian refuses to acknowledge personal sin and focuses primarily on structural injustice. Transformation requires a political agenda.

In conclusion Sider states that all four are an inadequate expression of the Gospel in and of themselves. Each one is lacking and each one fails to integrate the truth of the Kingdom of God. Sider says,

We can now see more clearly the difference it makes when we define the Gospel the way Jesus did: i.e., not merely as forgiveness of sins, but that and much more. Jesus' Gospel includes the fact that the messianic reign has in fact begun and there is now a reconciled and reconciling community whose visible life is a powerful sign of the Kingdom that has already begun and will some day arrive in its fullness (Sider 1999, 78).

⋮

Sider goes on to articulate seven differences that the Good News of the Kingdom of God makes when the church makes an honest attempt to live it out in the world.

1. Reconciliation applies between God and People
2. Salvation applies to social and economic relationships
3. Ministry applies to physical and spiritual needs of people
4. Community of Faith challenges the status quo
5. Proclamation directed to the rich and poor
6. Church is distinct from the world demonstrating Kingdom life
7. Proclamation includes both words and deeds (Sider 1999, 78)

The benefits brought to a city by a holistic expression of the Gospel and presence of the church may be summarized in the word “reconciliation.” Honestly living out the Gospel involves reconciliation among God, individuals, their community, their fellow human beings who suffer from poverty and injustice. All of the seven differences may be summarized by this seventh and final statement,

Finally, if the Gospel is not just forgiveness of sins, but the Good News of the Kingdom of God, we cannot share the Gospel adequately just by preaching. We have to live it too. Words and deed must go together. (Sider 1999, 78)

Sider too agrees with the authors of the *Missional Church* on the power of a faith community to proclaim the Gospel in their culture. Following a survey of various views on atonement which lead one to believe that salvation applies to persons and their community along with individuals in their culture, Sider emphatically states,

We dare not reduce salvation to a personal relationship with God in justification and sanctification because right at the heart of salvation is the new redeemed community. Christians are members of Jesus’ new redeemed society in which the Holy Spirit is now transforming all relationships whether emotional, social, or economic. Nor dare we reduce our future hope of salvation to an invisible, immaterial

world of souls, because right at the center of our hope is God's promise to make all things new (Sider 1999, 100).

Given that salvation extends to the transformation of culture through transformed individuals and as a by product the very systems that support culture, it follows that God wants to bless and empower work that graciously introduces people to redemption through Christ. Whether that redemption be illustrated in the life of one person, or reconciliation between people, or the reconciliation of a whole system that redemption reveals God's purposes to bless people.

The Concept of Missio Dei Applied to Community Development

To complete the discussion of theological integration and mission, several summary points are provided by David Bosch. He wrote and studied extensively on the topic of New Testament Theology and the church. He had critics and admirers from a broad spectrum of church leaders and provided one of the enduring text books on the nature of the church and mission, *Transforming Mission*. This was his final book originally published in 1991, before his accidental death in 1992. Quotes are taken from the 22nd printing published in 2002, by Orbis. It is from this work that several important conclusions are derived about the nature of missions and practices of the early church.

Bosch summarizes the doctrine of Mission Dei this way,

The classical doctrine on the Missio Dei as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another "movement": Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world. As far as missionary thinking was concerned, this linking with the doctrine of the Trinity constituted an important innovation. (Bosch 1991, 390)

In summarizing the concepts of various theologians from the early 1990s to mid 1970s, Bosch further concludes,

⋮

In the new image mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God. Mission is thereby seen as movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission. There is church because there is mission, not vice versa. To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love. (Bosch 1991, 390)

What Bosch represents is an innovation in understanding the role of the church in the world. The church isn't assigned the task of coming up with a mission project, but rather more appropriately to join God in His mission enterprise. God is already at work in the world. He has sent the church into the world for his missionary purposes. The idea that God is already at work in the cultures of humanity stirring and wooing all people to consider his Son more deeply helps clarify the church's role. Simply put the church joins the Triune God, who is already sovereignly at work in the world.

The next section will return to the discussion of the role of the church in culture. *Transforming Mission*, however, unequivocally establishes a new movement of mission's thinking that squarely recognizes God's ponderous role in sending the church into the world out of His great love for the world.

To make this discussion of the role of the church in mission more tangible, Bosch provides a helpful summary of the earthly ministry of Christ in terms of how Jesus gave expression to the Father's mission for his life. Bosch calls this "The Missionary Practice of Jesus and the Early Church." His five points are summarized this way:

Let me now attempt to draw together some major ingredients of the missionary ministry of Jesus and the early church.

First and foremost, the early Christian mission involved the person of Jesus himself.

The early Christian mission was political, indeed revolutionary.

The revolutionary nature of the early Christian mission manifested itself in the new relationships that came into being in the community.

In their mission the early Christians did not usher in utopia, nor did they attempt to do so.

It was not possible to convince everybody of the authenticity of Jesus. He ministered in weakness, under a shadow, as it were. This is however, how authentic mission always presents itself—in weakness. (Bosch 1991, 47-49)

Simply expressed the ministry of the early church was about Jesus and could be characterized as revolutionary, communal, focused and long-suffering. There is no doubt that the early church elevated Jesus in both their worship and their motivation. As David Bryant has been in saying in his lectures on the supremacy of Jesus, “Jesus is both the Center and the Circumference of the church.” (Bryant 2005) This apt description also applies to the activities of the early church.

Certainly their service could be described as revolutionary in that the church readily proclaimed that Jesus was the Lord of Lords, higher than any other authority on earth. Yet, the church did not set itself up to be a political movement. It is easy to see how Caesars and Prelates could be threatened by the church’s proclamation, but not so much by their activities. The church tended to be a community that was “criticized for social stands, not political power plays.” (Bosch 1991, 48) The communal activities were characterized by works of service and charity to the lowly and disenfranchised. These activities could hardly be described as political gambits, yet, the church won the hearts of people through the sheer magnitude of their love for the world. The church continued in the example Christ gave them to testify of the Father’s Kingdom and live in light of His certain presence.

The church was also focused on being witnesses of the Kingdom. They did not function under the illusion that they would usher in a utopia, nor that it was imminent.

•
•
•
•
•
•

Rather the church stayed focused on establishing the Kingdom while looking forward to the return of Christ when He ushers in a new era. There was no illusion that the present was as good as it was going to get for the world. The church lived out their faith leaving “signs” for others to follow. In these attempts, the church was long-suffering, even enduring starvation, torture, and martyrdom. The witness of the church continued the legacy of Christ who manifested a confidence in God who sent Him and certainty in His purposes.

These five characteristics of the way the early church expressed its mission serve as tangible markers for the church today. Whether it is a team of people sent as servants from a church or a team leaving to establish a new church, the marks of the church ought to bear the image of the one who redeemed the church, Jesus.

Lessons from the Book of Acts

One could say that community development is not demonstrated in the Book of Acts. The central focus of the book describes how the church was established in various regions starting in Jerusalem and moving to “Judea, Samaria and to the remotest parts of the earth.” (Acts 1:8) However, if the modern, North American constructs of government funded community development are stripped from the phrase one could argue that the church itself demonstrated a highly doable form of community development. The early church is described:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. [43] Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. [44] All the believers were together and had everything in common. [45] Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. [46] Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and

sincere hearts, [47] praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Act 2:342-47)

From this simple description of the church emerges the observation that ministry of the church was extremely local, as close as house to house and as personal as selling ones possessions to meet needs of a neighbor. But, an even more detailed description of the design process emerges when one considers the possibility that the Book of Acts also describes a process of how the church multiplies as it influences one neighborhood after another. In this study of the Book of Acts one can compare the list of modalities with the description of the activities of the early church and then observe themes in Acts related to community development.

Comparison of Modalities of Engagement to the Book of Acts

Identification of Capacities

As the disciples were dispersed from Jerusalem they began meeting with a variety of people and learned from their circumstances who they were dealing with and how to respond. Regarding the *Spiritual Partners*, the disciples begin in an upper room in prayer with one another. Scripture records “They all joined together in prayer” (Acts 1:14). Later in the same chapter the disciples asked God for discernment concerning one of the leaders in their group. They prayed that God would show them who should take over the apostolic ministry left vacant by Judas (Acts 1:24). Another example shows the disciples identifying a leader, Stephen, who will partner with him. They describe him as “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5). The disciples indicate that they were careful in their selection process to choose people to serve with them who would honor God with their faith and model spiritual passion. These partners were also selected after a season of prayer. The disciples themselves model a ministry of spiritual responsiveness

⋮
to God and the Holy Spirit.

Social Networks were also evident in the early church. There were networks of religious leaders both defined as Pharisees and Sadducees. But, there were even less formalized networks described in terms of “households” or family groupings (Acts 16 & 18). In some cases one person was introduced to salvation through Christ and via that relationship the entire household was welcomed. Cities demonstrated various affinities depending on political affiliations or ethnic connection. There were dividing lines between Jews and Greeks, as well as citizens of Rome and non-citizens. When the Apostle Paul was preaching in Jerusalem, the writer of Acts records, “He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him” (Acts 9:29). Each of these various groupings represents the concept of social networks as valuable sources of information and viable relational connections that help spread the Gospel.

The *Relational Dynamic* between public leaders and the groups they influenced are interesting to note. Gamaliel was as “a teacher of the law, who was honoured by all the people” (Acts 5:33). In that role he successfully lobbied the “men of Israel” to set the apostles free.” He argued for their release based on sound reasoning and a sense of historical precedence.

Another influential person was Stephen, one of those identified as a godly man to serve the church. He influenced the relational dynamics between people by trying to bring reconciliation (Acts 7:26). Later he was killed, people mourned his death, and conflict ensued which resulted in persecution for the church.

Toward the end of Acts, Crispus, the synagogue ruler, is cited as an influential man in Corinth. When he talked about Jesus his household responded, as well as his

fellow citizens (Acts 18:8). He had in common with the other influencers, to use his position and understanding of people to move them toward Godly objectives. The Book of Acts also records leaders who sought to disrupt the Apostles. One such attack was initiated by a slave owner (Acts 16:19) who lost the services of a demon oppressed woman. When she was delivered of the spirit the owners brought Paul and Silas to the local judges. Due to their influence “the crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas” (Acts 16:22).

Influencers are seen as both a source of positive and negative relational impact. In either case they use reasoning and relational connections to win approval for their positions and gain followers for their cause.

As already mentioned there are a variety of resources available in the ministry context, some of which are the *Financial* resources provided by the team and others outside the church. Acts mentions that the disciples sold property to help one another and “gave to anyone as he had a need” (Acts 2:45). One example is Joseph, later named Barnabus who “sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostle’s feet” (Acts 4:36). This gift was met with approval, while the gifts from Annanias and Sapphira resulted in punishment because of their duplicity (Acts 5:1).

The disciples also met the needs of others by taking a collection and sending the offering by special couriers. Scripture records “The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers” (Acts 11:29). But it wasn’t only disciples who met needs for the apostolic band. On at least one occasion their needs were supplied by their rescuers. When the sailors and Paul were rescued on the Island of Malta, Luke records, “the islanders showed us unusual kindness” and “furnished us with

the supplies we needed” (Acts 28:2-10).

The Book of Acts indicates there are a variety of ways that financial needs are met and tangible resources supplied. Whether from gifts or from the means of those they travelled with, the Apostolic band was provided for and out of their means gave to others.

Another provision that helped the early church flourish was the availability of meeting places for their *Spatial Requirements*. Homes were a frequent gathering place, but so were places of religious instructions like the Temple in Jerusalem and synagogues. Paul and Barnabus spoke frequently in synagogues in Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens to name a few. Occasionally their speeches infuriated the crowds and they were forced outdoors (Acts 17:5). Other times their message was met with approval (Acts 17:1). In at least one place Paul spoke in a formal academic setting “in the lecture hall of Tyrannus” (Acts 19:9). The disciples also spoke in a variety of open air forums and formal courts. Clearly, gathering space helped facilitate the development of the Christian movement. Sometimes space was used to gain a public hearing and other times private ministry happened in the homes.

Finally, the disciples and travelling Apostles made use of their *Legal* rights while they travelled. Paul was especially astute at using his standing as a Roman citizen to gain a hearing with public officials like Festus and Agrippa (Acts 25&26), but he also appealed to the court system and existing laws for protection (Acts 19:38 &22:25). The legal system proved useful for the disciples to promote their mission.

The disciples also observed various legal requirements of a religious nature. When Paul and his fellow travellers went to Jerusalem, they returned to the temple where Paul and “the men and purified himself” (Acts 19:26). The Apostles took time to get

permission from the other leaders as they were recognized by the church, commissioned by the leaders, and sent by the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:1-4).

Clearly the Apostles and disciples were willing to work under authority, civic and religious, using the guidance and protection of the legal requirements to serve the mission. This pattern is also helpful for those who seek to gain credibility with authorities and martial the resources provided under the law. In some cases, fulfilling legal prerequisites also opens doors to other kinds of resources.

Implementation of Activities

While accomplishing the mission God gave them the Apostles used a variety of forms of *Communicating* their message. They spoke with boldness (Acts 4:29), taught in the temples (Acts 5:21), preached in various setting (Acts 17:3), and proclaimed the Good News (Acts 17:23). It is interesting to note that several speeches are recorded at length in the pages of Acts. Stephen's defense was summarized in Chapter 7. Peter's speeches to the religious leaders, as well as Paul's message to the Athenians and his defense in front of King Agrippa, are all given a prominent record in the pages of scripture. Clearly, they were important speeches and deemed significant by the early church; so much so, that they were recorded carefully and given a prominent place in scripture. Teaching and equipping through written and spoken communication was a priority for developing the early Christian movement.

It is interesting to note that the *Developing* leaders chosen to lead the infant movement were recognized as being "unschooled and ordinary men" (Acts 4:13), having been with Jesus. Perhaps that was their greatest qualification for selection as leaders in the church, besides being eye witnesses; they were selected by Jesus to be with Him.

⋮

Jesus developed them as leaders and then others recognized their unique capability to boldly communicate what they saw and heard Jesus teach.

The Apostles continued developing leaders in a similar manner. Paul developed leaders by travelling with Barnabus, Silas, and others. Timothy, the young Greek caught Paul's attention: "Paul wanted to take him (Timothy) along on the journey" (Acts 19:3). Eventually after a season of training, Paul assigns Timothy to give leadership over a network of church, but not without further instruction. The New Testament epistles, First Timothy and Second Timothy are provided for Timothy's ongoing leadership development.

Acts also records Paul's final instructions to the Ephesians Elders before returning to Jerusalem. He tells them to, "Keep watch," "Be shepherds," and "Be on your guard" (Acts 20:28-31). This is the recap to approximately two years of training in their city. The statements are simple and to the point. Developing leaders for highly doable mission work would do well to follow Paul's model: experience life and ministry together while keeping the ministry practical.

Finally, the Book of Acts is also a study of *Sending* leaders into mission activities. Whether scattered by persecution (Acts 11:19), commissioned by the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:4), or appointed by elders (Acts 14:23), the early church delegated ministry rapidly to the next generation of leaders. However, leaders were not sent without considerable prayer and sometimes fasting. Paul and Barnabus were set apart after a season of worship and fasting. Likewise, "Paul and Barnabus appointed elders for them in each church and with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord" (Acts 14:23). The pattern of delegating ministry was a similar approach applied to them when they were

commissioned.

On a practical level mission teams will have varying levels of complexity associated with the ministry environment. Sending leaders may have a more thorough process for more complex ministries. Nonetheless, prayer and fasting should not be left off the list of preparation. Whether the prayer is for recognizing the call of the leader or discerning the direction of the project, delegating ministry deserves the benefit of godly inquiry.

The Book of Acts provides valuable insight into the nature of the team *Leading* the missional activity. Note the level of passion demonstrated for the work the leaders engaged in. Peter said, “Judge for yourselves... we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” (Act 4:19-20) These disciples would not be swayed from their mission. They knew something other people didn’t. They knew what they had to do, in spite of hindrances from people and the environment. They had seen Jesus and were absolutely convinced of what they must do (Acts 5:32). They also took responsibility for doing their part of the ministry. The Apostles said regarding the work of feeding the poor and preaching the word, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry” (Acts 6:2).

The Apostles were visionary leaders who responded with intense desire to complete their mission. They were internally motivated and spoke boldly. Besides having seen Jesus in action they were also given spiritual visions and dreams. Paul was blinded by a light and saw a vision of the resurrected Christ (Acts 9). Peter saw a sheet coming down from heaven (Acts 10). These experiences were instructional and these leaders responded. Luke says “After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave” (Act 19:10).

⋮

Not all mission projects will have this level of experiential preparation, but most leaders will identify some aspect of their mission that drives them. Whether it is highly emotional or more a matter of being intellectual convinced. Conviction helps get the mission started.

Sustaining mission takes more elaborate *Planning* than getting the project started. Acts illustrates planning on a fairly basic level. When Paul prayed and God showed him it was time to move on, he did. He had a list of places to go and kept the plan simple. When he was thrown into prison, the apostolic band stopped moving. They also demonstrated trust in God to orchestrate their next moves.

The Apostles modelled simplicity in their planning process. To focus their attention on proclaiming the word of God, they: identified the problem, empowered a selection process, and delegated responsibility. In the process seven men were chosen by their peers to take the Apostle's place serving tables in the Temple. They knew their priority and could relinquish the tasks that other people could do.

Paul also demonstrated simplicity in his approach to planning. When it was time to go to Jerusalem, scripture records, "Paul decided to go..." (Acts 19:23) and he would not be dissuaded by prophets or prisons. He followed the plan. The Lord handled the details.

Mission planning can also utilize this simple planning concept as a guide. After ministry starts to emerge and more elaborate planning is need, the disciples demonstrated more sophistication in their strategies. Observe how the epistles to the Corinthian, Ephesians, Galatians, and Colossians, written subsequent to the start up activities recorded in Acts, all give specific instruction for sustaining the church once it had

emerged. Yet, in the early phases planning was apparently quite simple.

The final orienting theme for starting a project is the finish line. The Apostles *Focused* their eyes on the ultimate prize of glorifying God. We read in the final verses in the book of Acts that Paul “preached the Kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 28:31). His unwavering focus remained the same from beginning to end. The Apostles endured unspeakable hardship and persecution, but their focus remained on the extolling the Kingdom of God. To be sure God was at work in their midst. He is also at work today. As leaders focus on His Kingdom and His righteousness they will have what they need to accomplish the other aspects of the mission.

Major Themes Presented in Acts Related to StreetGospel projects

Travel Preceded Establishment of the Church

As the church expanded out from Jerusalem, it also involved travelling from place to place by a group of believers or apostolic leaders. When the Apostle Paul received his call to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles, he took at least three identifiable journeys to go to the specific places where the church did not exist and then later returned to those places to develop leaders. In many ways this emulates the example of Jesus who also travelled from town to town and commissioned his disciples to go two by two to the town and cities of Judea and Samaria.

Travelling and meeting people in the geographic areas where ministry is spreading is an important common theme. It is also worth noting that Paul, for example, did not stay long in any of the cities he visited except for a few places like Ephesus and Corinth, where he had an extended teaching ministry. While he was establishing his work, it is noted that he gathered community leaders, worked within his legal rights as a

⋮

citizen, and took extraordinary efforts to speak to the highest governing official in his area.

In those areas where Paul established churches, none of the churches that started survive to this day. Some forms exist, but not as it was in his day. They have changed, grown, morphed, and reconfigured as it was turned over to local leadership who were deeply connected with their context. Visits by the Apostle did not permanently secure the future of local churches. Neither should we expect ministries establish in these days to remain static after being established. StreetGospel projects too will have a life cycle. The development of these ministries may even be added by leaders that come and go in their context.

Teaching Helped Build Communities

When Paul went into Corinth, for example, and he spoke to the crowds, he admired the statue in their city to the “Unknown God” (Acts 17:23). It brought people together, stirred curiosity and won a short term peace in which to tell more of the story. When he did tell the story of Jesus, Paul often started with history. He created a context around which people could see their place in the story that was about to be told. They could understand the facts that informed Paul’s message and perhaps just as importantly find a basis for agreement before Paul added anything new.

Following the history lesson Paul carefully wove in the story of Jewish sect that gave flight to Good News that a savior had been born and redemption won. Teaching brought communities together around common history and common needs. As a community development lesson Paul illustrates how to win the hearts of people by building relational connections first and then presenting teaching that relieves burdens, brings insight, and reframes perspective. His theology was highly practical.

Diverse Audiences had Various Responses to the Gospel Message

When Paul spoke in Berea his message was readily received, but when he taught earlier in Thessalonica, a riot ensued (Acts 17). Some leaders in the city were eager to hear Paul's message as in the case of King Agrippa (Acts 26), but in the case of the religious leaders in Corinth (Acts 19), Paul argued with them, and they became even more obstinate toward the message.

In building a basis for a new service project in a community or neighborhood, the leadership team can expect a variety of responses from civil authorities, neighbors, and religious leaders. Not everyone will perceive the message and ministry as good news. By expecting opposition and approval at the same time in the same place, it is possible to persevere despite the initial information one receives from on the street activities.

A Variety of Communication Techniques were Used

It is clear from the Biblical record in Acts that Paul and the Apostles used a variety of means of communication including speeches, face to face conversations, and written epistles. Sometimes the speeches were polemic in nature, and other times they brought comfort. For example, Paul's speech to the storm ravaged sailors (Acts 26) encouraged them to save themselves by swimming to land. The public forums took the form of debates, and at other times they were more like a classroom lecture.

Observing this fact throughout the Book of Acts helps mission workers conceive the use of various communication techniques depending on their context and not utilize an approach that worked best in another setting. One way to prepare for starting a new ministry is to be prepared to use a variety of approaches. For example mission teams could prepare in advance a speech, a classroom lecture, and a newspaper article to communicate the same message. When building a team and community consensus, it is

•
•
•
•
•
•
•

realistic as demonstrated in the Biblical record, that a variety of approaches has a greater potential to reach more places.

Early Missionaries Responded to Divine Guidance

The Biblical record also describes how Paul and the Apostles responded to what God showed them in dreams, visions, and prayer. While considering what direction to take the early disciples gathered together for worship and waited for God to open doors to the next place, or literally open doors of a prison cell. The disciples also took miraculous signs such as healings as evidence of the Spirit's empowerment, and they stayed in those places and spoke more boldly.

In community development work there are times when the faith community will discover a unique opportunity for ministry that they wouldn't have otherwise considered. Through prayer and seeking God's will in the context of the community, it's possible to add passion to a sense of discovery. As a team forms convictions that God is at work there is greater faith to approach governing officials, civic leaders and other in authority to ask for favours, legal approval, and so on.

Summary of Theological Reflection

In a pluralistic society, where multiple agendas compete for attention and the political process tends to favor those with the financial or social means, there is a tendency for churches to retreat from ministry in the public realm. While whole segments of the Christian Church retreat from public expressions of faith, the culture at large seems even more ready to ignore the church altogether. What if the Church, however, recognized the activity of the Holy Spirit, who is presently preparing lives and neighborhoods for ministry? And what if faith communities responded to God and joined

with Him in His activities in Culture to bring a message of reconciliation or a ministry of redemption? Would not the very activity of God be an encouragement to persuade Christians to get back in the game and play on the field where God is already active?

God's mission is not simply an enterprise of the church; it is a work of the Spirit who goes ahead of the Church... It is indeed true, gloriously true, that God goes ahead of his Church. But it is also true that he calls the church to follow. The Holy Spirit is not domesticated within the Church, but it is through the Church, the company of those (often unworthy like Jonah) who confess Jesus as Lord, that the Spirit brings others to that confession (Newbigin 1989, 168).

From a theological perspective there is no reason why the church should remain on the sidelines while the culture at large defines what role the church will have in influencing agendas and proclaiming Good News. It is clear that Good News is bigger than a single city or nation. It is a Kingdom of God issue. Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is near" (Mark 1:15). The Gospel also needs to be lived out with dramatic, yet cooperative ministries, which reconcile, energize, and even admonish. Selfishness is not just a trait in the world; it is also resident in the church. The King is calling the church back out into the world for an adventure with Him in cooperation with Trinity. The Spirit has led the way and God has already empowered his people.

•
•
•
•
•
•

Bibliography

The full bibliography is in the original document.

Contact Information

Neil Tibbott
Missio Team - CRM –Seattle
Email: ntibbott@crmnet.org

\