

Launching Missional Communities: A Field Guide

The following is a somewhat-organized-yet-semi-random selection of excerpts from the book in order to spare you having to read 228 pages!

What is a missional community?

A missional community is a group of people, about the size of an extended family, doing the mission of God together outside the regular confines of the church building.

Doing church in a more “missional” way... involves some level of decentralization, with unpaid leaders leading groups larger than small groups to join God’s mission in the world... There is a dynamic interplay between these groups on the fringes and the resourcing, equipping center of a larger body... *an organization of agile, networked organisms.*

We discovered that the small groups that wanted to maintain a missional outlook were “small enough to care but not big enough to dare.” We decided to gather them together to form larger mid-sized groups so that the mission-focus would be better supported and therefore more easily maintained.

A missional community is a group of anything from 20 to 50 or more people who are united, through Christian community, around a common service and witness to a particular neighborhood or network of relationships. With a strong value on life together, the group has the expressed intention of seeing those they impact choose to start following Jesus, through this more flexible and locally incarnated expression of the church. The result will often be that the group will grow and ultimately multiply into further Missional Communities. Missional Communities are most often networked within a larger church community (often with many other Missional Communities). These mid-sized communities, led by laity, are “lightweight and low maintenance” and most often gather formally and informally numerous times a month in the group’s missional context.

A missional community:

- Is a group of between twenty and fifty people (at the most seventy)
- Can be either a new church plant or, more commonly, a sub-set of a larger gathered church
- Centers on Jesus, helping people become and then grow as his disciples
- Has a defining focus on reaching a particular neighborhood or network of relationships
- Takes place in community and often revolves around shared times of food and fun
- Has a healthy balance of UP, IN, and OUT
- Does not require that members be professing Christians to belong
- Is unashamed about following Christ, in values and in vision
- Conducts worship, prayer, and Scripture reading as core practices
- Looks outward through a mixture of service and verbal witness
- Has a common mission focus that is the glue for the shared sense of togetherness
- Gathers informally throughout the week, not just at formal meetings
- Includes a high value on small groups for support, challenge, and closeness in member’s life together
- Has leaders who receive ongoing help, coaching, and accountability
- Has leaders who do not do everything - they facilitate and release others to serve and lead

Public worship gatherings are incredibly important. However, this one gathering cannot be expected to fulfill the New Testament descriptions of deep, challenging, life-changing relationships that should exist between followers of Jesus. We need to realize that when Paul and other New Testament writers addressed the early churches, they only conceived of churches meeting in homes, no public “church-owned” buildings. As medium-sized gatherings, they shared their lives together

and reached out as a community to the lost around them. In fact, almost all of the letters Paul wrote were to churches with a maximum size determined by the number of people who could gather in a home, which was probably in the fifty to seventy range.

Missional Communities, at their core, are a community of people who love to be together and know how to have fun, as well as being a place of identity and generosity. This community is on mission together to impact a particular network of relationships or neighborhood, by incarnating the Gospel into that specific context through words and deeds.

When at least 85% of our dollars, energy, and human resources go to that one day a week, how can churches really expect to also engage in meaningful mission and discipleship? There's simply nothing left in the tank to do that with.

What we find in medium-sized communities is the ability to be both attractional and missional. The ability to have a pioneering, low-maintenance, laity-driven vehicle on the frontlines of the missional frontier being resourced and equipped by a mission center where everyone can gather, celebrate what God has done, look at what he will do, experience a bigger story, and go back into the mission fields... with fresh energy, vigor, and enthusiasm.

Friends, family, neighbors, and colleagues are invited to come and be part of the MC which is an extended family of relationships... There is no test in order to come to an MC; simply a desire to discover more about God, whatever someone's journey has been up to that point. MCs aim to offer a grace-filled, non-judgmental welcome in the name of the Father... Within MCs, people seek to share their lives with one another day-to-day, so that this overflows into their formal meetings. The relationships in MCs have to blend into "normal life," or else they become yet another thing to clog up our schedules. Structures, such as formal meetings, do not create life, but they can be helpful in sustaining it.

MCs recognize that their measure of success will, above all, be the stories of lives transformed, of the wider community being impacted and reached for Christ, of people being drawn closer to their heavenly Father. Such change happens in community rather than in isolation, since every aspect occurs with the love, challenge and impetus of others, as everyone tries to live with one another as Jesus would. In short, they are a community on a mission.

What is missional?

To be a follower of Jesus means that you, too, are called to be a missionary... Going in mission is not an optional extra - an upgrade for the "mature disciple." Going in mission is fundamental to the journey of discipleship and from day one we should view ourselves as missionaries. In the New Testament we see the continual train of totally ill-prepared followers of Christ being sent out in mission. Jesus starts sending the disciples out as early as Matthew 10, at a stage when they hadn't even declared Jesus as Messiah, let alone Lord, and their response to his teaching was primarily marked by misunderstanding and shallow selfishness. In the book of Acts, Paul frequently wins a few people to Christ, starts a church, and then skips town. He leaves these baby disciples to fend for themselves with only an occasional follow-up visit month, even years, later (i.e. Acts 13-17).

Jesus showed us that going in mission is something we can start doing from our earliest days of starting to follow him. Bible study, training, and growth in maturity are vital, and often they can supercharge our mission efforts. In the same way, mission - like worship and fellowship - is an essential part of discipleship from the very start of our Christian journey. Reggie McNeal puts it like this: "We must change our ideas of what it means to develop a disciple, shifting the emphasis from *studying Jesus* and all things spiritual in an environment protected from the world, to *following Jesus* into the world to join him in his redemptive mission."

The Western, and in particular the North American, church has tended to be very successful in the attractional model of doing and being church. Unfortunately, the missional component is often lacking or completely absent.

"Our mission has not life of its own: only in the hands of the sending God can it truly be called mission. Not least since the missionary initiative comes from God alone... mission is thereby seen as a 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 the fountain of sending love." (David Bosch, Transforming Mission)

"Mission is what the Bible is all about." (Christopher Wright)

Theologians have long identified that our role is less to start mission than to recognize and in response join in with God's mission to the world.

In each of the four Gospels, Jesus makes it clear that his disciples are to go to the lost and that we are to make that the center of how we think, love, and live (Mt 28:19-20; Mk 16:15-16; Lk 24:46-48; Jn 15:26-27).

Mission is following the Lord of the harvest into the fields, becoming the answer to his (and our own) prayers, "Send more workers into the fields" (Mt 9:37-38).

We are all rapidly coming to the conclusion that attendance at Sunday services alone won't produce disciples, however good the programs on offer.

Going occurs in two related yet distinct forms, service and witness. In Luke 9 and 10, Jesus sends out the disciples with the instruction to do two things: heal the sick and cast out demons, and proclaim the kingdom.

"The twentieth century saw the emergence of a Churchless Mission and a Missionless Church." (Eddie Gibbs)

We go as a community, inviting people into community... Our default mode as Western Christians can be to see mission as a solo activity ("me and my witness in my workplace, neighborhood, etc."). But the under-girding of the Bible is covenant relationships. While we do have a personal witness, the evidence of the New Testament is that everything happened in teams. Jesus sent his disciples out in teams. The Acts of the Apostles show teamwork within almost every missionary venture, while we only have to read the greetings in the letters to see how highly Paul valued his team members.

"I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the center of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town garbage heap; at a crossroad so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew and Latin and in Greek; at the kind of place where cynics talk smut and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died. And that is what he died about. And that is where churchmen ought to be, and what churchmen should be about." (George MacLeod)

Rodney Stark has shown how the early church grew exponentially in three centuries. Beginning in AD 30 with around 1,000 believers (around 0.0017% of the population of the Roman Empire), Stark shows how by AD 350 the total size of the church had multiplied to roughly 33,882,000 (56.5% of the Empire).

In his final words to his disciples, Jesus clarifies what making disciples means: Teach them to do everything that I have taught you. A disciple is someone who does the same thing Jesus' disciples did... If you aren't missional, according to Jesus, you aren't a disciple. And if Jesus has called us to make disciples, it's a Gospel imperative to teach everyone, not just the evangelists, how to be missional in their everyday comings and goings.

What is UP-IN-OUT?

As we read in the Gospels, Jesus had three great loves and thus three distinct dimensions of his life:

- UP: deep and connected relationship to his Father and attentiveness to the leading of the Holy Spirit
- IN: constant investment in the relationships with those around him (his disciples)
- OUT: entering the brokenness of the world, looking for a response individually (people coming into relationship with Jesus) and systemically (systems of injustice being transformed)

MCs balance their energies between an UPward movement towards God, an INward movement towards the MC as a place of identity and an OUTward movement to represent Christ to their missional contexts. When they gather, they express this in creative ways that are appropriate to their context. There will be great diversity between groups in how this looks, with a variety of faces and voices being given room to step forward and contribute what they can. The only rule is that they do not try to do a miniature version of a Sunday church service!

People of Peace

As you seek to go out and reach the lost with the Good News, Jesus gives you a simple strategy for doing just that. He tells you to look for the person who welcomes you, serves you, and responds to you. This person likes you and, probably, you like him or her. A Person of Peace will in time prove to be a gatekeeper to a whole network, or neighborhood, of relationships. Therefore, once you recognize a Person of Peace, you stay and intentionally invest in that relationship to see where God will take it.

In Luke 10 (and Lk 9, Mt 10, and Mk 6), Jesus teaches his disciples to search out the man or woman or child of Peace. A Person of Peace is someone who:

- Welcomes you
- Receives you
- Listens to you
- Serves you
- Responds to you

We are to look and listen to discern where the Holy Spirit is already at work, as we go about our lives

One of the markers of a Person of Peace is that the individual often becomes a gatekeeper to his or her community. In other words, as Jesus moves through you to change that person, he or she will then introduce you to his or her network of relationships, granting you favor, access, and opportunity with those people.

The invigorating part of the Person of Peace strategy is that it stops mission being yet another thing to cram into our busy lives. Instead, this strategy is about bringing the Gospel where we already are - as we shop, play sports, collect the kids, go to work, meet the neighbors, etc. Thus, the healthiest Missional Communities are reaching out to their context in ways that feel natural and life-giving.

Team-building vocabulary

It is not the main job of the leaders of the church to run everything. Instead, they set the values and outcomes by which groups will be measured, providing tons of encouragement, wisdom, and practical support, thereby letting the Lord express himself in all manner of creative and wonderful ways.

- Low control, high accountability - pursue the creative dreams the Spirit puts on your heart while being accountable for your character and the way you lead
- Lightweight and low maintenance (i.e. children's activities don't need to rival Disneyland)
- Everyone can play - everyone in the MC comes ready to give more than they receive, the leaders and most gifted need to step back and create the space for others to realize that they can step forward
- Multiplication from day one - our MC will one day multiply and we will talk, pray, and plan toward it

Our experience is that groups that gel the fastest are the ones whose members share common battle stories and missional escapades (successful and less so).

Who can be an MC leader?

You can't move into Missional Communities without first creating missional leaders... The best MC leaders are completely devoted to following Christ into the mission field, recognizing that, wherever they are, the field around them today are white unto harvest. If these leaders find themselves in an especially challenging season of life, they still view themselves as missionaries into those tough places. As the leaders allow God to work through them in those everyday situations and interactions of life, they find rich blessing and fresh grace given to them, by the Holy Spirit, their team, and those they are seeking to reach.

- Are they committed to Christ? - on path to Christlikeness (character), free from bondage to grievous sin (conscience), general knowledge of basic doctrines (creed)
- Are they committed to our church? - part of the church for 9-12 months, regular Sunday worship, consistent financial giving
- Do they have a clear mission vision? - UP and IN will be determined by OUT; full ownership and responsibility
- Are they willing to be accountable? - loyal, constructive, servant-hearted, submissive OR proud, challenging, disruptive?
- Will others follow them? - cannot expect senior church leaders to find group members for them

MC leaders need to expect to be around long enough to properly establish, develop, deepen, and multiply leadership in any new group.

Leading MCs

It is a nightmare to have an MC where the leaders are constantly tugging against the flow of the whole church, creating their own private fiefdom.

MC leaders must understand that they are not to do everything themselves or be the "always available with an answer or an assist" person! Their role is more like the conductor of an orchestra and certainly is not that of a one-man band. The leader is there to empower group members to empower others, under the authority and power of the Holy Spirit. Like a gifted orchestra conductor, an MC leader brings the best out of his or her leaders.

MC leaders recognize that there are others in the group who are better suited to perform most functions. Even if the leaders happen to be the most gifted, they want to train and release others.

High Invitation + Low Challenge = Cozy/ Lazy	High Invitation + High Challenge = Empowered
Low Invitation + Low Challenge = Bored	Low Invitation + High Challenge = Stressed

One of the core values as a community is living within a healthy rhythm of life. This means that we have seasons of activity and busyness, and seasons of rest and renewal. This rhythm of work and rest occurs within a day (it's called sleep!), a week, a season, and a year... During a twelve-month period, each MC has a month or two when the community significantly dials back on meetings and organization.

The leader constantly takes people back to these two questions: What is God saying to me? What am I going to do about it?

Good leadership is about leading others through change in a way that fairly preempts and addresses fears and concerns, without being held hostage by them.

Freedom to fail is a high value, so MC's can be a place where people experiment and attempt new things. There is no perfect group.

Have people bring their calendars for the next week or two and then draw the UP-IN-OUT triangle on a whiteboard. Then have them look at their schedule. How is it weighted? What you will quickly see is people are quite selfish with their time. My schedule, left to my own devices, revolves around what I want, when I want it, almost exclusively with the people with whom I want it. But I should be able to look at my week and clearly be able to see:

- UP - When am I resting this week? When is my day off? When, each day, am I pulling away and spending time with God? What about my family? Are they getting my best?
- IN - Am I spending time with people in our MC? Breakfast? Coffee? Lunch? Dinner? Movie? Gym? Basketball? Am I spending time with the people who I can encourage and be encouraged by?
- OUT - Who am I spending time with this week that doesn't know Jesus? What if I had dinner with that couple who are People of Peace along with the other couple in our MC, so that way we are doing OUT and IN together at one time?

What most people see is that they are reasonably strong at IN, maybe decent at the UP, but are woeful at the OUT.

The best stuff is usually coming out of the organic that has developed from the intentionality of the organized.

One thing you will want is times when your place is open and your leaders can just come and relax... a time when we can just be, enjoy each other, tell war stories, laugh, and take care of each other, all without trying to grow the group. There isn't any structured time, it's just friends being together.

Church staff

The major transition in the role of the staff is the change from being paid providers who do everything to enablers of others so they can play their part... Staff are not there to do most of the work of the church... A good challenge to a church is for the staff to be released to spend time outside the church building in mission.

Prayer exercise

Use the Lord's Prayer to help you pray about your Missional Communities:

- The Father's character - He is the giving, generous, going, searching, community-building Father. What other names of God are relevant for your situation?
- The Father's kingdom - His will is for the Kingdom to forcefully advance in your city. Talk with him about particular people and place that especially need this.
- The Father's provision - He WILL provide all that is needed... by you, your church, your leaders, your mission, your city. Ask for specific needs and expect him to provide.
- The Father's forgiveness - He loves to help us to change from old to new ways. What specific attitudes and actions need turning from?
- The Father's guidance - He will lead you. Where is the Father at work and where can we join him?
- The Father's protection - He protects us against the wiles of the enemy. Talk with him about specific areas of concern.

How do MCs grow and sustain their increased numbers?

Consider Jesus' parable of the sower (Mk 4):

- Sowing - Creating space where people can connect relationally in very easy ways. People are exposed to others who know Jesus, have an opportunity to see his power at work, and see the extraordinary lives of his disciples. They think, "I like these guys, I think God might be good, maybe Christians aren't that weird." The seeds of the Gospel begin to be sown to many, many people with varying levels of depth. They think, "Wow, their faith actually means something to them, and they are different because of it. That's really interesting." People are given a chance to process, ask questions, and let the Gospel sink in more fully. This may be a time to invite them to a Christmas or Easter worship service or to a forum for exploring Christianity.
- Reaping - People have heard the Gospel and they are still coming back for more. The seed sprouts in some people and they decide to start following Jesus and step into God's kingdom.
- Keeping - They grow deeper roots, become more mature and begin to sow and reap with others

In the framework of Luke 10, People of Peace meet someone, spend time with them, taste community, see the power of God in a very real way, and then they are told that the Kingdom of God is near them... Most people assume that evangelism is a pressure packed, awkward, sweaty experience where we are called to "witness" to unsuspecting victims. In contrast, the beauty of this Sowing, Reaping, and Keeping process is that within MC life it allows people to play to their strengths... Some people may not be great at gathering people, but they have a gift for sense when people are ready to hear an insightful spiritual remark or are able to share the Gospel in a warm, welcoming way... Help people find their sweet spots.

Most churches, over time, become quite insular, creating a type of bubble and as more time passes, more relationships with people who aren't Christians fall by the wayside.

If our MCs only collectively know five to ten People of Peace, and even those relationships are dodgy at best, we will need to spend more time doing Sowing activities. In other words, be out where the people are.

Almost every time we overestimate what we can accomplish in our strength in one year and vastly underestimate what God can do in his strength in five years.

Health check: Is your MC balanced?

For each sentence, give your MC as score from 1-10, answering from the perspective of the group as a whole.

UP

- Group members take regular time to retreat, reflect, and pray
- You pray regularly together
- People in the group feel close to God
- Your group worships God on Sundays
- You hear God's voice when you gather and put into practice what he is saying
- As a group you observe spiritual disciplines - tithing, fasting, journaling, silence, etc.
- You are shaped by Scripture together

IN

- Everyone has someone in their life who knows them - there is nothing being carried along in darkness
- Within the group, both marriage and singleness are supported with a healthy and balanced perspective
- People are comfortable both giving and receiving mentoring
- People feel that they belong to a group that forms an authentic expression of the church
- The group is characterized by regular and gracious hospitality
- You all feel loved emotionally and supported practically
- People feel surrounded by meaningful community

OUT

- Your group has a clear missional focus towards which you devote time and energy
- Your community spends time with lots of friends and contacts who are not in church
- In the last month, your group has found ways to lovingly demonstrate the power of the kingdom of God to people who are not Christians
- Your group has seen people with whom you are in relationships start to follow God in the last year
- Members are involved in lots of activities beyond church life
- The place where many MC members spend most of their time (work, study, play, etc.) is predominately in relationships with non-Christians
- As a group you are excited about serving the wider missional context
- In the last three months, each member has offered to pray with someone who is not a Christian
- Your group is actively involved in an area in which injustice exists

When do MCs meet?

MCs meet whenever they want, both formally and spontaneously. MCs usually need a regular formal meeting pattern during the month, including gatherings that are fully OUT-focused, to provide some intentionality to their core activities... We recommend that an MC meet together as a whole group weekly when it first begins, as this allows the MC to become the primary place of identity (rather than a small group). Over time, this may well shift to perhaps once every two weeks... MCs work much better when people within them are gathering throughout the week, in smaller and larger settings.

What about Pastoral care?

MCs should be the primary place of support, both spiritual and practical, when people and households are dealing with sickness... Increasingly the aim is to wean Christians off expecting a

clergy visit as a mark of the church demonstrating care. This is a vital process, as it allows the church to grow without there being a bottleneck caused by the availability of the staff/clergy/elders.

Where do small groups fit?

Why not groups of six to twelve people as the building blocks for communities on mission? For several years we experimented, tweaked, maneuvered, and cajoled our small groups into being more missional. Sometimes it work, but most of the time it didn't. In the few cases when it did work ,the multiplication of the small group was incredibly painful, and no one wanted to grow the group again only to have to go through the multiplication process once more. In the end, we found that, when trying to make small groups missional, one of two things happened:

- They often refused the call and continued to stay inwardly focused
 - There was never enough momentum due to the size, and burnout soon ensued
- Futhermore, the latest research on small groups shows that, at best, the top small groups can multiply only three times and then the group is done.

The smaller the group, the harder it is to organize the group on behalf of someone else... We can't organize someone's closest and most intimate relationships (unless we are trying to form a cult), so church leadership and community can only model, encourage and, maybe, resource deeper relationships.

The reason that many churches have had large small groups is that they had no other expression of church, except Sundays. With the rediscovery of the medium-sized gathering, many of those pressures are taken off small groups; so, to some extent, they start to become redundant in their larger expressions... The priority is to start and establish the MC, then small groups flow out of that life and identity. This is by far the easier way to do things, since it is much easier to sub-divide something than it is to multiply it... Trying to turn a bunch of separate small groups into one MC is much harder, since there is a primary and thus stronger affinity to the small group than to the MC.

Creating community

How about neighborhood cleanup days, taking care of people's lawns, prayer walks, monthly block parties? Is there an elementary school near you? Adopt it and volunteer to help with cleanup and repairs. Do several of you work in the same field? Start a breakfast and invite your co-workers. Do you have a particular hobby or interest? Start being properly involved and build relationships. The key is to take what you love to do, pray and ask Jesus how to bring his kingdom in that context, then watch for People of Peace and be present.

Ronald Rolheiser says, "People who love community always end up destroying community. People who love relationships always build community." If you make community an idol, it will self-destruct. If you make relationships the focus, community will naturally follow.