

Basic Overview of Discipleship Pathway

As we seek to live as missionaries in the city our ultimate goal is both discipleship and mobilizing a missionary people. For the purpose of this article we will look at six movements or progressions of missionary engagement that happen upon a relational continuum. These progressions move from entirely organic to more strategic engagement. Not only does the continuum move from organic to strategic but it also moves from larger to small, the goal is to get smaller not bigger. The six movements that we will explore here are: Faithful Presence, Invitation, Shared Life, Strategic Conversations/Felt Needs, Intentional Discipleship, and Missional Living.

Faithful Presence

In the beginning of John's Gospel he tells us that the "Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood." Theologically we call this incarnation and it is central to our understanding of the mission of God and by extension the mission of God's people. In the incarnation we are confronted with a God that refuses to remain in the realm of mystic spirituality and speculation. Incarnation also introduces us to the profound importance physicality plays within Christian spirituality. What starts with incarnation ends with resurrection; this means that the entire Christian narrative is rooted in the relationship between the physical created world and God's Kingdom. The goal of our Christian spirituality is not to depart one of these worlds for the other but rather to bring these two worlds together so that they are no longer seen as adversaries but rather as deeply connected partners. In this vision the gospel happens in this connection as God's world heals the brokenness in ours.

As we look to move towards a missionary posture in our communities we must begin with this idea of incarnation or what we will call “Faithful Presence.” The goal of the gospel is the renewal of creation and though the ultimate renewal is universal in its scope it must be particular in its expression. By this we mean to say that gospel renewal must be connected to context and a place and this connection happens through the people of God. In the New Testament the world is introduced to Jesus and his mission when he is 30 years old. Though the story of his mission is meant for everyone (universal) it takes place in a specific place and time (particular). Using Jesus’ life as a model we can see that he spent 30 years living faithfully in his context. He was not only a student of his culture and history but was also a participant. He did not seek to change people from the outside in but rather his message was born from within his context. Our missionary movement must begin with faithful presence. We, like Jesus, must move into the neighborhood and become a part of the life, community, challenges, economy, etc of that context.

In missionary lingo we may call this “Embedded Living.” In this encounter our goal is to be the guest not the host. In order to embed we must identify what we will call the “Social Mosaics” that we are going to enter in order to begin establishing relationships. These mosaics are the place’s in our community where life happens in such a way that it connects people together through a shared experience. As humans we are relational beings. This means that when we live together in a community we begin to establish a network with those around us where our lives become intertwined. Mosaics are the places in our community where those networks are established. Everything from a city park to a local school or pub can be places where these networks are created and fostered. For each

community it will be different and it will take time for us living faithfully in that community to identify these.

In the context of the city we must be prepared for this to take some time.

Conversations must be initiated and trust must be built. Consistency is the key to this. As a missionary I believe that God is already at work in the lives of the people I am meeting they just may not recognize God yet. My goal is simply to be alert and point out where God is at work and what the gospel is inviting them into. The primary goal here is establishing relationships through being present. We are not...NOT...trying to convert or convince people. If we fall into this trap there is a danger of seeing people as a conquest and the relationship is inauthentic.

Some examples of the ways we may choose to embed are; attending community meetings, finding a local hangout and being there consistently at the same time each week, participate in classes at the community center, getting involved in the school, workplace, sporting events, etc.

Invitation

In classical evangelicalism we look at the word invitation and our mind imagines us inviting people to some sort of event sponsored by our church. However, if we are truly looking to posture ourselves as guests and not hosts then this scenario must be flipped upside-down (or maybe we should say right-side up). If our metric consists primarily of growing our institution bigger than inviting people to our thing is the way we arrive at a "Win." But if we are looking to redefine success around the kingdom (as opposed to the free market) then relationships are a key metric. This means that rather than measuring success by how many people come to our thing we begin to measure success by how many

people invite us to their thing. When we are invited into someone's life and network then we know we have embedded and we are becoming a part of the culture/community. In the Gospel of John we are reminded that God's redemptive acts are motivated by God's love for the world...not the church.

We must continue to develop metrics that move us away from church-centric thinking and strategies and towards a more robust community engagement. Far too often we develop centripetal strategies that focus our attention internally and not externally. The motion, action and energy of the church becomes fixated on itself and the result is self-preservation and emphasis on survival. In this paradigm the metrics used to measure whether or not we are successful are primarily internal and lead towards institutionalization. Centrifugal strategies on the other hand use the internal energy and movement to focus outward towards the community in which we have been planted and to which we have been called. This sort of metric system is much more difficult to quantify and relies heavily on narrative over and above data or hard numbers. This means that we cannot develop a success metric if we are unaware of the unique needs in our context and how our participation in the community could help bring healing. An important warning needs to be issued here – this may not result in church growth as traditionally understood. The stakeholders in the mission must understand what success looks like and what is worthy of being celebrated.

Shared Life

Invitation may seem like a simple metric but it is a key measurement if we are looking to be salt and light in our community. When the people we have encountered in our mosaics invite us over for dinner or out for drinks or to a birthday party we know that

genuine relationships are being established. This not only opens us up to a deeper relationship but also to more relationships and more intimate engagement with the life and energy of our community. Again, it is important for us to remember that the goal here is not to infiltrate a community in order to change it. That would be colonialism and it does not reflect the heart of God. We absolutely want to see gospel renewal in our communities but this happens through our faithful presence and participation. We are a gospel people so wherever we go gospel renewal will go with. This does not need to be coercive or forced. Also, we must anticipate that we too will be changed and shaped by our community. Life on life, when done genuinely and with integrity, will always result in a mutual transformation (this is an important metric to be considered and we must wrestle through creative ways to quantify this. How has your engagement with the community to which you have been called transformed the way you see yourself and understand God and the world around you?). The life and story of those we build relationships with will impact and change us. This is the way God has designed us. We should anticipate and welcome this. It is this community that begins to develop that leads to shared life.

The puritan philosophy that dominates much of evangelicalism was one in which retreat from the world was seen as the proper response to the brokenness in the world. However, in the incarnation we do not see God running from our brokenness. Instead God chooses to immerse God's self within our brokenness in order to plant a gospel seed. The movements we are exploring here are not movement away from but rather movement towards.

This means that we have to learn to live in the tension between planting the gospel and living with and learning from those whose beliefs are different than ours. Shared life

cannot take place if our goal is to make everyone else believe like we believe. This requires us to accept others and even learn from them. It requires us to find common ground and places where we can work together for a common goal. No matter what your beliefs are things like love, justice, equality, laughter, family, etc are common things we all crave and for the most part these are things we can agree on no matter what our belief system is. As we live into this kind of community and shared life we will discover that opportunities abound to share how we make meaning in life and how the gospel informs everything we do. These strategic conversations become our opportunities to share the gospel and invite others to receive it.

Strategic Conversations

As we begin to build relationships and trust with people through a shared life we will find ample opportunities to have honest, strategic conversations that point to God, love, life, faith, etc. Our goal is that as we get to know people, identify thirsts, and have conversations around the gospel people will be compelled to investigate further. If and when they come to that point we can then invite them to join us for more intentional conversations. This can take place in a small group, church service, one on one, etc.

One way we did this in Chicago was through what we called “Dinner with Friends.” The dinner was very organic. We would share a meal together and just let the conversations happen. We always tried to intentionally move it toward faith and spirituality. We wanted our home to be a place where people would feel welcome and accepted. We wanted our friends to know that we had no ulterior motives and they can come as they are. The conversations we had were not meant to prove someone wrong, instead we wanted to ask questions and allow God to work in us all. Moving towards

strategic conversations is really about paying attention. It requires us to see everything through a gospel lens and pay attention to opportunities where God is at work in our conversations and experienced together. These conversations will often start off very organic but the more opportunities we have to engage in gospel dialogue the more intentional these conversations will become. This is especially true when people are confronted with life experiences and challenges that do not fit into the “meaning-making grid” they have established in their belief system.

Intentional Discipleship

Once we have established a relationship with someone and they have been open to strategic conversations to the point where they are confessing their desire to practice their faith and follow Jesus then we can move them toward an intentional discipleship triad. The focus here is to talk through the core issues of discipleship, how they are practicing those in their life and what areas they feel God is transforming them.

The key to intentional discipleship is praxis. This means that people who are living as disciples are practicing their faith and having time to reflect on how those practices are affecting them in small groups of three to four. The discipleship revolves around the practices of: Contemplation, Community and Compassion. Disciples are being taught who they are in Christ, and what the gospel says and does. They foster this relationship (Contemplative) through personal disciplines of prayer and reflection. Disciples are also learning the value and necessity of redemptive community as part of their spiritual life. This is lived out through the dialogue and honest reflection happening in their triad as well as continued participation in a faith community. In community disciples learn to accept who they are by living authentically, learn the power of their story, and how to forgive

(among many other things). Finally, disciples begin to move towards identifying their strengths and gifts and how they can partner with God in God's mission. Initially this happens by the disciples participating alongside a mentor in different missional activities and eventually disciples are encouraged to identify their own social mosaics as they seek to embed in their neighborhood.

Mobilizing for Mission

One of our primary goals in discipleship is to mobilize God's people in mission. This final piece happens when the discipler steps out of the picture and the new disciple now begins to engage in embedded living. When we recognize disciples are ready for this we walk alongside them as they seek to embed in their neighborhood. Our hope is that they will essentially recreate a contextualized missionary engagement in their neighborhood in a similar way that we connected with them.

Conclusion

Although we conceive of this as a pathway it is important to understand that this is not necessarily a linear process where people move from point A to B and so forth. Everybody's story is complex and unique and their spiritual development will be no different. The value of developing a conceptual framework is not for the sake of having a road map but rather helps us to develop an understanding for the process, an awareness of where people are at and a strategic identity of who we are called to be in our community.

Our mission is not to plant churches. I do not believe that is part of what God has commissioned his people to do. We believe we are called to go into the entire world and make disciples. We fully anticipate that as a discipleship movement gains traction we will begin to see multiple expressions of faith communities emerge. We celebrate the

formation of communities so long as it does not distract us from the ultimate goal of loving God, loving our city, making disciples and sending missionaries around the world.