



Missional Journal

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Caring for Strangers

Sometimes people ask the question, "So what does it mean practically to be missional?" They understand that the church has been too inwardly focused. They see that we can't just hope non-Christians walk through the door. But what does it look like for congregations to live as the "sent people"? How can pastoral leadership encourage Christians to move *into* the neighborhood?

These are good questions. There is no one-size-fits-all answer. Missional living calls for Spirit-led creativity which seeks outreach that is appropriate to the varied context of each local congregation. We can't provide universal models, but we can illustrate the principle.

Just recently I received a great story from my friend Rick Paashaus who serves as pastor of worship at Calvary Bible Fellowship Church in Coopersburg, Pennsylvania. After a bit of arm-twisting, Rick agreed to let me share his story with you.

Two months ago I was reading through Deuteronomy and kept hitting up against those phrases about "the aliens within your gates." Kept thinking...yeah, right...Coopersburg [PA]...the only aliens here are those of us who don't happen to be Pennsylvania Dutch...and maybe one or two black families and one or two adopted Korean kids. But then I went to the diner for lunch and was cared for by a Mexican, saw another Mexican refilling the salad bar, and noticed a Greek immigrant cook on his break. It really got my mind going. Where do these folks live? Who is showing any interest in them? What about the staff of the diner in general, folks who are Greek Orthodox but rarely darken the door of a Church anyway?

My wife and I came up with a plan to invite THEM to a dinner, just to say "thank you." And they responded. We

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provided a full course dinner with tablecloths and china and candlelight, and 35+ of the staff from the diner came and enjoyed it immensely. We took some pictures over the past weeks and secreted out some shots from over the years and put together a surprise video before the meal. No preaching. No handouts or signup--just our way of saying thanks and getting to know the staff better. Many of our own people were there to help, serve, mingle, listen. The diner people loved it. Some were tearful when they arrived and couldn't stop saying, "I can't believe you guys would do something like this." They stayed for three hours and left with containers of leftovers. We even sent 12 dinners over to the staff that had to work and couldn't attend.

Don't know what the results may be--perhaps nothing visible--but at least the server from Mexico who is living above the pizza place while his wife and child remain across the border felt valued and cared for one night. And the waitresses who so often serve us and wait while we linger over a third cup of coffee realized that they were appreciated. It was the right thing to do, and the Lord was glorified without too many words.

There are several points to be made from this story.

First, the starting point was a fresh reading of the biblical text from a missional perspective. By this I mean an interpretive stance which presumes that the unifying theme of Scripture is a narrative about Yahweh, the missionary God, who reconciles the world to himself through the promised Messiah. This perspective highlights certain points of the text that might otherwise go largely unnoticed; it raises questions that move beyond merely historical or exegetical concern. Who are the aliens in our community? What are their greatest needs? How is the Spirit leading us to extend hospitality to them?

Second, a missional reading of the Bible encourages a distinctive way of "seeing" our communities. For many of us life is too busy to allow us to see what God wants to do through us. Will and Lisa Samson observe that life in the suburbs seems particularly designed to perpetuate our blindness: "The burbs are safe, but they are safe at the price of keeping out questions of need, questions of poverty, questions of insufficiency. In fact, they are designed to maintain an illusion of a particular life, the American dream, where no one is needy, where there is a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage...."[1]

Of course the tendency to look past kingdom opportunities is not new. One thinks for example of the disciples traveling through Samaria with Jesus. Their concern is with the challenges of the journey and the logistics of finding food. Jesus, on the other hand, speaks of having food that they know nothing about even as he ministers profoundly to a woman they would as soon look past or disregard (John 4:31-35). I love Rick's story because it reminds me that we need to see through the eyes of Jesus.

The third observation is that **actions speak as loud as or louder than words**. This is especially true in our post-Christian culture. The church now finds itself playing an away-game. The fans who watch the game no longer view us as the home team. They are neutral at best and sometimes downright hostile.

David Kinnaman surveyed perceptions of Christians among outsiders to the faith, ages 16-29. Among the 440 people in the sample, only 10% had a "good impression" of "born-again Christians" and only 3% had a good impression of Evangelical Christians.[2] In another survey Kinnaman reports that only 20% of outsiders "perceive Christian churches to be loving environments, places where people are unconditionally loved and accepted regardless of how they look or what they do." [3]

In this context cynicism runs high and words--including gospel words--are regarded with suspicion. So actions become the metaphors of the gospel. Not that we never speak. Words are still necessary, but we have been too much about words--words as theories, words without deeds, or even words with the wrong kind of deeds. As Hugh Halter and Matt Smay have observed: "**Christianity is now almost impossible to explain, not because the concepts aren't intelligible, but because the living, moving, speaking examples of our faith don't line up with the message**. Our poor posture overshadows the most beautiful story and reality the world has ever known." [4]

Kinnaman talks about the need "to articulate a 'kinder, gentler' faith--one that engages people but does not compromise its passion for Jesus or its theological understanding of him." [5]

What we need right now are churches that put both words and deeds in the service of the mission of God. And we need leaders who can encourage this balance--leaders like my friend Rick who can help us think more creatively about the opportunities that surround us.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rick", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

[1] *Justice in the Burbs* (Baker, 2007), p. 59.

[2] *Unchristian* (Baker, 2007), p. 25.

[3] *Unchristian*, p. 185.

[4] *The Tangible Kingdom* (Jossey-Bass, 2008), p. 41.

[5] *Unchristian*, p. 16.