

MICN.org Article:

Starting Churches Missionally

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I started my church planting ministry in Southern California during the late 80's. Our association of churches started many new plants by gathering people with a shopping mall style "Grand Opening" worship services. But some of our least-Christian, totally unchurched friends wouldn't come. For them church was a foreign activity even though Jesus had become familiar. This caused me to re-think how to plant new churches in terms of missional behavior. I've found three categories of activity that describe what this missional behavior looks like: submerge, emerge, and converge.

Before I unpack these activities let me tell you about a man whom I befriended during those early church planting years. He was a vice-president at a financial institution. He carried a lot of responsibility at work and his wife nobly picked up the pieces at home. We began meeting around simple Bible discussions and then he joined a men's group that met in my home on Saturday mornings. In those meetings, he came alive. He expressed that God was doing something in his life that he didn't understand, but thought was good. He wanted to experience more. With his family he agreed to have a Bible study meet in his living room with other friends and even served red punch to children in his white-carpeted family room. Sometimes we had 20 to 30 people gathered in his home. When it came time for our Grand Opening worship celebration, he visited once and then stopped. We never heard from him again in a substantial way.

To be sure there were other circumstance surrounding his decision to pull away from the new church, but I couldn't help learning the lesson of authentic spirituality at this point in my journey as a church planter. I'm afraid that what we promoted as godly activity and celebrated as a Grand Opening of a church was more like an item for me to check off my "to do" list than the launch of a spiritual community. Thankfully, I'm seeing a more organic, spirit driven approach emerge that honors a process we can all learn from as we follow Christ together.

I've described this more relationally real pattern of starting churches in terms of a "life cycle" that begins with Submerging, which moves to Emerging and settles into Converging before Submerging again. The process is not as neat and clean as these three steps would indicate... there's a lot of overlap, but it describes something of the journey of the Church Planting leaders I've met in Seattle and other parts of the world as they form a faith community that emerges out of true friendships and loving relationships.

To unpack this alternative life-cycle a little more, here's what I'm seeing:

Submerge :::

This begins with a leader and a few friends, maybe a family with some connections, kind of like the way Jesus sent the 70 out into the countryside of Judea while traveling

toward Jerusalem. The co-laborers who submerge become an Incarnational presence in their neighborhoods. Whether they submerge in an actual geographic neighborhood or “relational neighborhood” like a college campus or gym is not the issue, they are experiencing the joys and agony of being with those whom they live.

In the process of knowing the people who share life with us, we also become known. When we submerge we are converted by our culture just as our friends are converted to Christ. WE in fact become more like Jesus, not less in the process. Going deep into relational connections we offer, I believe, two significant gifts to our “neighbors”... we offer the gift of conversation and the gift of gathering.

Emerge ::: :::

Through the significant relationships formed in culture a faith community begins to form and have a public presence. The band of friends begins to rise, emerge, with their culture communicating with words and deeds that readily translates the Gospel message into the heart language of the “neighborhood”. One church planter I know began gathering friends together to hear Seattle street musicians and artists perform. Not all the Artists presented a Christian message, some weren’t even Christ followers, but the community now enjoys a monthly gathering of their extended family of 70-80 friends in the basement of a church where they hang out and listen, talk, drink coffee and do life. The good news, believe me, is not that they get to hang out in the basement of an old church listening to music. The Good News is Jesus present in their gatherings.

The emerging church, the community of faith becomes known in their neighborhood almost as much for their choices as the life they experience together. People begin to see choices that represent investments in what is good and honorable. Artists, athletes, parents and students find ways to connect with one another around shared ambitions and even celebrate their relationships

Emerging is as much about blessing the neighborhood as it is becoming known in any public way.

Emerging churches know enough about a neighborhood to be a blessing. Often church planting activities start with the assumption that we can scientifically know our demographic group and then provide services that attract people. While some leaders find that approach suitable, the vast majority of new church leaders discover much more diversity in the lives of people they are reaching than any demographic profile would support. Getting personal in our neighborhoods helps the church become a blessing in personal ways.

Converge ::: :::

As I see it, faith communities that come together through this process of Submerging and Emerging, never entirely leave this tension of ministry. They always experience the tug between what is now and what will become, between worldly culture and Kingdom life, between sanctification and glorification, between having enough and needing more.

It's just that at some point the faith community, the New Church is strong enough to sustain their mission from within culture. They thrive while in tension.

Convergence is not finally arriving, but rather a place in a church's existence where they understand and can articulate God's unique call for them as the Body of Christ. The mission is sustainable and recognizable and becomes reproducible, not because they have "stuff" to give away but perhaps because they realize how much of the harvest is still untouched by their community.

It is the realization of distance geographically and relationally that creates a new tension among some members of the faith community to submerge again. Sending members to reach more people, to gather more sojourners, to discover what Jesus is doing will lead communities, and I pray, to multiply churches where they are and to the ends of the earth.

Where are you in the process? Do you hear the voice of the Holy Spirit calling you to be the Body of Christ for people who only think they've heard the Gospel? Do you hunger to express the Gospel in words and deeds for people who have learned to ignore the church? I do. I hope to have many more years living out the gospel and seeing the Light shower blessings in places where darkness previously reigned.

Personal Bio...

Neil Tibbott serves as a coach and equipper for church planting leaders in his role with Church Resource Ministries (CRM). Currently he coordinates a Church Multiplication degree program at the Northwest Graduate School in Seattle.

Links...

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