



You are church before you do church. This is one of the fueling insights of the missional church movement. This isn't a new idea...but it is pretty provocative, especially when one considers its implications. If we take Jesus at his word when he says (as recorded in John 20:21) "as the Father has sent me, I am sending you," then we realize that our being sent is the basis of our "doing" church. In other words, missiology precedes ecclesiology.

If this is true, then why does modern church planting amount to "service starting?" This is putting the cart before the horse, ecclesiology before missiology. We decide how we are going to "do" church before we have built missional relationships. Putting missiology first changes how we think of ourselves as the church.

Just to prime the pump on how we might move forward to engage our neighborhoods missionally, I'd like to suggest to you 6 incarnational practices. These are the sort of things that a group of Christians can do out of their existing church, but I think it is better for a group of Christian friends to practice these sorts of things BEFORE a church is established. As they engage in these practices, they'll begin to meet people and know people and as those people need to be discipled and grow in their faith, an ecclesiology for that context should begin to emerge.

So, these practices are written with church planters in mind, but should be helpful for the rest of y'all as well.

Practice 1: Move and Observe

If you want to minister in a neighborhood that you don't live in, you should move into that neighborhood, or at least very close to that neighborhood. It is difficult to be incarnational if you are a commuter. You need to cultivate similar life patterns and center your life on the same sort of places and institutions as those you want to befriend.

Once you move into the area (or if you already live in the area), spend time just

observing. Don't get in a hurry. Don't start doing things until you understand the ethos of the neighborhood. Let the spirit of the place make its impression. Fall in love with the little things. Get to know the people. If you start "doing your thing" before you are familiar with the place, then you're forcing things too much. Ministry should fit with how God is already working in a place. If you start pushing your agenda before you start making friends with the neighbors and finding out about their lives, then you're a salesman, not a minister of reconciliation. And throughout it all, pray. Pray for spiritual eyesight. It is the Spirit's job to reveal Christ...not just to "them" but also to "you." Pray that you can see Christ's fingerprints in your neighborhood. Pray to see the face of Christ in the face of those who live around you. Pray for the Spirit to show you what is wrong in your area, and also what is right.

. Seek to understand.

Practice 2: "Intentional Friend-Making"

"Intentional friend-making" is different than "friendship evangelism" because the goal of friendship evangelism is to share your faith with your existing friends. I highly encourage that. That is a great thing. But the problem is that if we stop there, we never move beyond our (usually homogenous) circle of friends.

Here's the basic idea:

Pay attention to where people congregate and hang out. It could be a coffee shop, it could be a bar, it could be the park, or the library, or a café. We should try to spend our time more and more where neighborhood people spend their time.

It isn't enough to spend time there, though. You must engage people there. This is where it gets sticky for people. We don't naturally make friends in public places like that, though it is socially acceptable to do so. Many people hang out in

["third places"](#)

(not in their home, not at their work) because they want to connect with a neighborhood and their neighbors. These are the general rules of social interaction that I have discerned:

1. If you see someone at your favorite place a few times, you have permission to give them the "nod" of recognition (or subtle wave).
2. If you've recognized their presence a couple times, it is socially ok to say "hello."
3. Once you've said hello to someone once or twice, it is ok to make comments like "hey, it sure is nice today" or "is that book you're reading interesting?" [if someone is deep into reading their book, it may be rude to interrupt them, but if they look up on occasion, it is probably ok to talk to them].

4. After you've broken the ice, you can introduce yourself.
5. Once you're on a first-name basis. You have social permission to have normal conversations with them, and things develop from there.

Here's the thing: most of us follow this sort of interaction in settings like school or at church, and it is perfectly normal there. Just realize that it is ok to do those sorts of things at third places too. If you are a bolder person, you can skip steps. It isn't offensive to have polite chit-chat with strangers. It is only rude if you do it when they are in the middle of something that requires attention. And that is better than not knowing them at all. Those of us who make connections with people in this way will be able to graft them into our network of friends. So in a healthy church, only a handful of people need to be doing this well for the whole church to be making new friends.

Practice 3: Gather in 3rd Places (not in their home, not at their work) and Homes

Being incarnational means that the Gospel should come to people where they are. When we build special buildings just for fellowship, and then center ministry and community in that place, we are asking people to come to us. Sure, you can do incarnational ministry out of a church building. But I think the edifice complex that afflicts many churches is contrary to their missional calling. The energy and resources tied up into buildings should be used elsewhere. The amount of time spent in church buildings should be spent elsewhere. Church should be done where life is lived--not the other way around. The early church gathered in homes and the apostles preached in the markets because those were the centers of society. What are the centers of our lives? Be the church in those places, rather than making your own place.

If you are involved with a church that meets in a church building, I'm not suggesting that you leave. Many churches use their buildings well. But most don't. If we are going to be faithful in the future, we need to rethink how we gather.

Practice 4: Mobilize Discipleship

When Jesus trained his disciples, he didn't take them into the wilderness for 3 years. He didn't take them to Jerusalem Seminary for 3 years. Nope. He took them with him for 3 years. The way you do training and discipleship should fit the form of your church. The University system developed out of a medieval ecclesiology. The current Seminary system is roughly based upon the university system. And most in-church discipleship training is often loosely based upon seminary training. We need to re-orient our methods of discipleship to fit an incarnational church.

True discipleship happens in the context of being on mission together with your disciples.

Practice 5: Volunteering (instead of starting new programs)

Most urban areas have social service organizations in place. I suggest you volunteer with

them instead of starting church programs--at least early on in the life of your church. When we volunteer, we submit to the service organizations--yielding to their agenda instead of forcing our own. In that place, we can begin to make relationships with people. As we meet people and get to know them, we have the opportunity to take that friendship outside of the volunteer organization. As we find out more of their needs, then we may try to serve them as a church.

The basic idea is this: utilize existing structures. Build relationships within the existing systems. Social services provide a great way for you to meet people (both volunteers and those with needs) without having to put a lot of time and energy into planning. You get the benefit of meeting people by simply volunteering. And you will grow in your understanding of the people you want to serve. Plus, you are helping people. And too many churches don't do enough of that.

This, of course, doesn't mean that a church should never start programs. A church may be obligated to do so because there is a profoundly unmet need. Or you may be led to do so; these are simply suggestions to help you think through being incarnational, not hard-and-fast rules.

Practice 6: **Limit Your Attractiveness**

These practices are merely illustrative. Take them for what they are. I think if everyone did more things like this, the church would be healthier.

In their book [The Shaping of Things to Come](#), Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch suggest that many churches follow an "attractional" ecclesiology rather than an "incarnational" ecclesiology. Basically, attractional churches try to make it very easy for seekers to visit them. They attract seekers to come to the church, where they will experience God. Incarnational churches go to people **where they are** instead of spending a lot of energy on attracting people to come to a service.

This final practice challenges those who want to cultivate incarnational ministry while still maintaining an attractional style. The attractional approach and the incarnational approach aren't two complementary approaches: they are two different foundations for doing church. Incarnational churches start with the assumption that they must go to where people are at. Attractional churches may do some incarnational things, but they are ultimately trying to bring people in. You can not have a church effectively built upon both approaches.

And so, if you want to be incarnational, you have to limit the attractional things you do. This is our sixth practice. It is easier to have more people if you are attractional. But if you get a lot of people who come without being incarnational, your church may lose its incarnational flavor. Furthermore, if you are building relationships with cynical people who have been neglected and abandoned in the past, the worst thing is to get a bunch of people moving in and out of attendance, building relationships with folks, and then breaking it off when they no longer find the church attractive. And so, you have to decide that you won't "grow" your church by attracting people from all over to come to your funky service. You need to decide that you're going to "grow" your church incarnationally.

You may do some seemingly attractational things (like community announcements of events). But be careful. Keep your incarnational focus. Make sure that you are engaging people where they are...and build your church as you build new relationships. Don't fall into the attractational trap. Attracting a crowd may seem like the best course of action now, but it is reinforcing a deadly habit.

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