

# Small Groups Network Symposium

## Alan Roxburgh - Exploring Missional Engagement

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*A compilation from notes taken by: David Knight, Stephen Kidd & Dennis Funk*

The Kingdom of God cannot be defined – it can only be described by stories

Modernity demands definitions - to control things,

but we can't control the kingdom – or mission

Even in the OT, God would not tell people his name YHWH is a puzzle that defies solving; God's name is too wonderful for us.

The term 'missional' is not easy to define – but it can be described.

### Theology of Mission

We know the Great Commission in Matthew 28. But Luke 10:1-12 gives a different approach to the Great Commission. – “Go and enter the house of ‘the other’ and give them your blessing of *shalom*. Receive their gift of hospitality. This implies “enter into their world and listen to their stories and share yourself and your story with them – which includes your life-in-the-kingdom of Christ.”

According to David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, (p. 85-86) Luke was anxious to show his readers that Christian leaders – including the apostles – struggle against the Spirit who keeps going outside our box and bursting our boundaries. He shows that God is always on-mission, but the church always tries to control it. In Luke 10, the disciples are not in control, the Spirit is, and the evangelists have to watch for clues from the receiving people.

In Jesus' day, everyone in Israel knew that the exile was not over – they were still under Rome, but the 70 evangelists (representing the OT elders of Israel – Exodus 1:5, 24:1) are sent to announce that in Jesus, “the exile is over, God has come to bring his “*shalom*” to us all. This was a radical public political declaration.

Luke was saying to the post-apostolic generation, “Jerusalem has fallen, the synagogue has rejected you and Rome is persecuting you, but God is still on-mission. Get out of your churches and enter the neighbourhood and listen to your neighbour's stories and announce God's *shalom* in the name of Jesus.”

In the same way that Jeremiah spoke to Israel during the exile, “your future is not in Jerusalem. Don't go back - we are in a strange land and it is here we have to seek God for answers. God has plans for you here. God will meet you in the Diaspora, in Babylon.” We ask “how can we sing the Lord's song in a pagan land?” Luke and Jeremiah say, “listen to the Spirit.”

### Welcoming Strangers and Listening

God keeps coming to us as ‘the stranger’,

as he came to Abraham through the 3 visitors, as he came to wrestle Jacob.

Cultivate friendship with ‘the other’; be intentional about spending time with them.

In the same way we must welcome the other and host them, not ‘use’ them. We must make a space for them. (See Newbigin, *The Household of God*)

Our people need to be converted to expect to meet God through the stranger and neighbour. In suburbia, people are ripped out of their primary relationships; suburbs are neighbourhoods of lonely, isolated, busy or bored people. Transformation requires being linked with ‘the other’.

Evangelism training and SGL training needs to include giving people questions they can use to draw out other people’s stories, and training our people to shut up and listen, to truly attend to people’s stories and then to point out links between their story and the God-Story – (like Jesus telling parables) and not telling people what to do, but to let them ponder the link between their story and the God-Story. This leads to what Sedmak calls ‘doing local theology’; (Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: a Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity.*) listening for the truth and for God-clues between the lines.

The church does not take people’s personal narratives seriously  
As a result people do not value their stories; they do not see God at work in them and they do not listen to other people’s stories. So people accept canned strategies for converting others. This never creates community, only conformity.

The Kingdom is a new social community where people’s stories and their narratives of God-at-work-in-them is valued.

Is the church the safe place where people can express and have others listen to their stories / narrative? We must teach people to listen.

This listening is not a tactic (as in ‘listening for a gateway to interject your Gospel presentation). It is listening as a way of loving and valuing the other, believing that God is already at work in their story though they may not know it – and may even deny it. It is listening for clues as to where God is at work.

#### Intentionality and Disciple-making

But the Great commission is not “go into all the world and make friends”. It is more intentional – ‘make disciples’. It is not like ‘dating with no intention of taking it further. Disciple-makers are intentional. How do we do that?

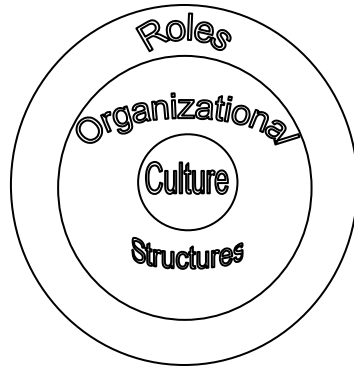
Be ready to give an answer. Your Story is part of who you are. Don’t withhold that, but don’t force it; don’t impose it.

#### Culture and Change

Culture is how we look at the world. Culture is deeply imbedded in us.

It is the core of human sense of identity.

Organizations and institutions are expressions of a people’s deepest cultural convictions. “Culture goes to the deepest part of our identity. You mess with my identity, and I’ll kill you.”



We create roles and structures to maintain these organizations. Changing the organization or its structure or people's roles alone will not affect our deep cultural identity.

We refuse to change our culture and we defend the structures that sustain it.

- Leaders who try to change culture must first demonstrate excellence within the forms and roles of the existing culture;
- Congregations are socialized to defer to clergy.
- People can follow a leader as long as he's there, then they return to what they did (behaviours and beliefs) after he leaves. The leader then blames the leader(s) that follow, as the "changes" did not remain.
- Pastors cannot effect transformation. People default to the leader, as this process doesn't translate into a change of the DNA, but they can create a space conducive to other people learning new ways and creating new structures.

### Small Groups

The church small groups movement of the 60's - 80's was not missional, but rooted in

- trans-personal psychology – Carl Rogers, Keith Miller, Faith-at-work, etc
- sub-urbanization and the quest for personal autonomy blended with the search for connectedness but 'under my control',
- the search for intimacy and authenticity;
- a product of modernity which steers us out of public community into privatized search for self-fulfillment through structured individualism

Being missional requires I give up autonomy and self-directedness and listen to the Spirit and discern God's direction.

Don't try to convert 'sharing groups' into serving groups. They will not convert.

You can invite 'sharing groups' to do a serve project

You can start missional 'serving groups'

As small groups look for outreach ministries, look for where God is already at work, look for partners already engaged and ready to connect with you. This takes the pressure off having to make something happen, and inadvertently doing the wrong things.

Ask the city – how can we serve you? Consider what assets the church has to offer *i.e.* how has God already equipped us to serve the city?

Give people first-serve opportunities; give them a taste of going beyond themselves  
Many opportunities are relational – reading to the blind; conversing with ESL students  
People need low-risk experiments. We learn by risking, but too-great a risk puts our  
identity/security in peril.

Invite people into a safe place to hear what God is doing to save the world.

Missional groups listen, pray, give, learn and serve together.

This is an *iterative* (back and forth) process, not a linear progression; groups will circle  
back and forth through these experiences. Good leaders help them to interpret what's  
happening. Groups need reflection time to discover where God is at work in their  
serving. This is how they grow in knowing God through serving.

### Time and busyness

Taking time to meet the neighbour will expose our excessive busyness – we're captive to  
our agendas, even church agendas. This is another reason church small groups will not  
convert to become serving groups – it will be one more add-on activity they cannot  
afford. People need to be converted to live in God's time. We've been socialized into  
living by secular rhythms – hectic. The Christian story re-orientes us to living in God's  
time – church calendar, daily scriptures and prayers – consider the following for daily  
focus:

- Monday – creation theme
- Tuesday Incarnation theme
- Wednesday Spirit theme
- Thursday Community theme
- Friday- Cross theme
- Saturday – the saints theme

This keeps us attentive to expecting to meet God is the moment – and to be set free from  
our bondage to our own time agenda.

### Leadership

Leaders do not create the vision and plans, they create safe space for others to explore  
and with one another. It creates some anxiety which is good. Anxiety produces change.  
Create anxiety by 1) continuing to do what is expected. Begin where they are, not where  
you want them to be. The people must experience that they are not the object of the  
leader's goals or programs. Leaders/pastors gain and build trust by performing their  
expected roles with excellence. (Trust is high capacity in the expected field of operation)  
2) Once trust is gained - create low-risk experiments with tools and resources.

Leadership needs to allow people to bring narratives onto the table, to allow them to  
speak what has not been allowed, to surface hurt and pain, including that caused by the  
church). This is where transformation begins.

### Boards in a Missional Church

The most important quality for an elders board is to be a council of discernment,  
committed to listening for what God is saying and doing.

### What good are Buildings?

What is the value of the church building for a missional church?

What are the dominant metaphors that would give meaning to church buildings today?

The home as a refuge of privacy away from the public eye; and the mall (places that people congregate for business and to avail themselves of choices for consumption).

But we do need space and place for our identity. We need space for God's drama and mystery to be lived out, and where we connect with mystery and sanctify expressive individualism. People today are looking for intimacy as they hope their homes will be.

Most evangelical churches are designed for expressive individualism; this is not what heals the wounds of post-modern people; we need to use them for recovering mystery as the cathedral did –

- a center to display exquisite beauty that en-fleshed the Story.
- A training center for life and discipleship
- A sanctuary – i.e. a safe place of safety

ETC.,

Beware of the 'Oprah-ization' of the Bible', using our preaching to show 'how to make life work'. Embrace mystery; trust parables to do their work; give space for imagination. People outside the church and inside are disoriented. No longer understanding where the world is going and don't have the language to describe the churning in their guts that they feel.

Volunteerism – many are experiencing this as “in the moment”. It's for a season or a time, but how does it become and enter the DNA of a person and a community? To see it happening for months is not the same as it being a lifestyle of individuals and the practice of a community over years.

Summary of some practical take-aways (last portion of the day):

### Listening and Framing

Listening (listening to the “other”)

- listening as not a tactic, but as a habit/part of my makeup
- Don't give the answers but let the person's story/narrative and Scriptural narratives stand together. Let them be allowed to wrestle with it. Relinquish control of the text.

Framing (taking the stories we are hearing and framing them with Scripture narratives)

- do not use the Bible as a tool, Scripture needs to be able to “read” us
- Listening and Framing leads to our need for the poet in our communities
- Need to take these practices into our small groups
- Requires a “soft / relational” leadership, not a “hard/program” leadership. People are not objects, we need to create relational space. Place energies into “hang out” with people versus changing structures and creating programs.

### Joining in where God is already @ work

A theological imagination and framework that God is already ahead of us takes away the anxiety that I need to make something happen.

(Who are our partners? Who among us are already serving?)

How do we join with what is already happening? How can we serve into this?

Begin to see people in your church that are already connected in the community.

We need a theology of what is God shaping in us – it is not up to us to control and plan for God.

### Community is created by serving together

Focus on practical serving into the community. Hands-on and meeting real needs. Its an avenue to relationship building. In the midst of doing we stumble upon community.

This is not a linear approach. This is a bottom-up movement with relational connections being pre-imminent.

### Use low risk Experimentation

Risk is about my identity and I don't want to be shamed. If we are placed in high-risk situations that may cause us shame, we and others will not return to similar situations.

We often learn best from our mistakes, but they need to in low-risk shaming situations.

Ex. North Park Church. – Engage process of helping people to Learn – Give – Serve the needs of London. They can begin with Learn – very low risk and move on from there. Some can begin at Serve, because that's where they are already. And many of the opportunities in serving community takes all 3.

Stories are basic to:

Imagination

Transformation

Questions raised from the small group interaction @ the Symposium:

- ...but we do have an agenda (Great Commission) as Christians. Is being “friendly” & “neighbourly” enough to fulfill it?
- Are we as churches willing to be shaped by our communities?
- Are we really attuned to the needs of our neighbours and communities?
- What can we learn from our non-believing neighbours about reaching out?
- How does proclamation fit into being intentional?
- What needs to be in place in the corporate church to make this happen?
- How do we become missionary focused without just adding “one more thing”?
- How do we balance “availability” with rest?
- How do you balance “going out” with “Christian community”?
- Why do geographic neighbourhood ministry when we have relational networks?
- Why isn't the gospel being spread (the culture impacted) despite all the past and current initiatives: emergent / friendship evangelism / missional??
- How do you motivate an existing Christian community (church) to be mission-focused?

- How do we engage people instead of building programs?
- How do we spiritually form people so that “going” is natural?
- Can understanding where we’ve come from help us move toward a new direction?
- What about the neighbourhood of the city where our church is located?