

Better Bubbles or Incarnational Communities?

by SF Metro Team Campus Crusade for Christ

Have you heard student leaders moan, “We’re so inward focused. How do we really guide this community to make an impact for Christ on campus?” We have, every year. There are many issues under that: fear, not sharing God’s care for lost people, a view of fellowship that is just about ‘us’ and many others. We’d like you to consider one issue that, to us, is the real critical issue every student leader should be able to pass along to their followers. It’s an offbeat word – Missional. If it’s in your heart to serve a student group that’s reaching the whole 21st century campus with the gospel you’ve got to see yourself as a missional person. Read on, let’s see why.

God Loves Lost People

First off, let’s make a quick pass over a few passages that give us a sense of God’s attitude toward lost people.

- 2 Peter 3:9 – he doesn’t want anyone to perish but all to come to repentance
- John 3:16 – he loves the world enough to make great personal sacrifice
- Luke 15 – three amazing stories about God’s desire to find ‘lost’ people, the lost coin, the lost son, the lost sheep

Jesus Had A Special Mission, Now We Do Too

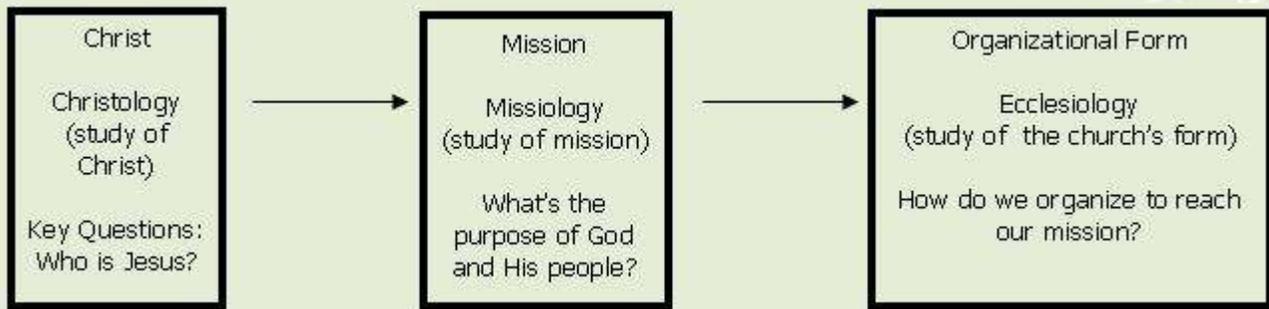
God cares for lost people, that’s probably not big news. We’re in a process of becoming like Christ, being able to move in the world as He did and move from the same heart. Becoming like him means sharing his heart for lost people. He didn’t want us to miss this, check out these passages.

- Luke 19:10 – Jesus came to seek and save the lost
- John 17:18 – The father sent Jesus on a mission, Jesus sends us on the same mission
- Matthew 28:18 – We’re on a mission to make disciples

Though it’s not always obvious, we’re always on the mission from God just like Jesus was. Being missional means embracing this reality of being on a mission like the mission The Father gave to Jesus. There are many ways to go about accomplishing that mission. Before we get into our best idea of how to pursue this mission, let’s look at this basic theological framework.



It's About The Water Not The Pipes



Often we don't think deeply about why we form ourselves the way we do. The easiest thing is just to replicate what's familiar to us. When we've grown up going to church and youth groups with their particular forms, the easiest thing is to simply transplant those forms and do church on campus with worship services, leadership teams, and occasional outreaches. But, theologically, form is flexible and needs to serve our mission and our Lord. We're comfortable with tweaking form so that it helps us reach our mission. The real point is to accomplish our mission and most of all to make a full and accurate representation of Christ. Form serves function. Say a friend comes to your house. They ask for some water. You fill their glass with cool water from the tap.

Picture: At Experience Jesus 05, Mike Eere challenged students to pledge: "I pledge to abandon all and follow Christ." They marked their response with a inked thumb print as voters often do in the developing world. You can hear the challenge to join Jesus, the revolutionary, on www.metamore.org

It would be silly for them to say, "Hey, nice pipes." No, they'd say, "This is great tasting water." The forms we use are the pipes. Jesus and the joy of knowing our creator is the refreshing water. Pipes are important but they're not the main thing, really they should just be in the background serving the water.

The Starting Point Is Christ

When we consider what our form or pipes should look like, we need to get started by looking at who Christ is and what His mission is. Here are a few important ideas to consider.

Christ Identified with Us – God is much different from us. He's beyond gender, all powerful, unhindered by time and space, all knowing, and perfect in every way. In other words, not like us. But, because He desires relationship with us and redemption for us, He bridged the gap. Praise God! Strangely, he took on a body, had bad breath, ate and became hungry, experienced human love and limitations. This is a massive truth that makes our faith attractive, mysterious, and very special. Check out these passages:

- Philippians 2:6-8 – Christ 'made himself nothing, taking on the very nature of a servant'
- Hebrews 5:7 – Christ experienced sadness, discipline, and prayed desperately like we do

The point is that Jesus went to a place of unfamiliarity and discomfort to reach us. We can understand his message because he's walked in our shoes, experiencing our human condition. Being missional means we need to take this value with us by identifying with the lost students around us.



He Was Local – You’ve probably heard of ‘locals only’ surf spots. There’s something alien and suspicious about outsiders, we don’t expect they’ll understand our reality. God understands this and so Jesus became a local person in Nazareth.

- John 1:14 – Jesus dwelt among us – his light was right in front of us in our space

The point is that Jesus was a local person with all the environmental knowledge and relationships that a local person has. He understood the nuances of language, the importance of farming metaphors, the existing political structure, and the issues that were important in his locality. Jaeson Ma talks about the Power of Presence, “we pray and are led by the Holy Spirit to pockets of un-reached students, we are to then show up and befriend those lost groups of students. The most effective way of befriending a lost group of students is by serving and caring for their needs.”

He Modeled Relationship with Sinners – Jesus lived his life so much with sinners that he was even accused of being one of them.

- Mark 2:16 – the religious establishment was shocked that Jesus ate with sinners
- Luke 7:34 – they accuse him of being a sinner himself

The point is that we must follow Jesus into making real organic relationships with people who don’t follow God. Our hope is that everyone would know someone who’s authentically following Jesus, even the notorious sinners on your campus. Being missional means that we need to be relationally close to lost people around us if we’re going reach them with the good news about God’s love.

Our Mission Is To Influence Lost People Around Us Not Hide Ourselves – As we move close to them and live out our faith our light will shine, not be hidden.

- Matthew 5:13 – we are salt and light for the world, not hidden among ourselves
- Matthew 5:16 – as we live out our faith in front of them they’ll come to praise God
- Titus 2:10 – Paul recommends that workers not steal so that the teaching about Christ will be attractive to the masters.

The point is that we are to live in holiness among the not-yet-Christians. Our good deeds and demonstrations of Christ’s love will be attractive to them. Being missional means being intentional to live out Christ’s lifestyle publicly and engaging in tangible demonstrations of love toward the lost people around us.

What Form Do We Take?

Missionality is embracing our mission - the reality that we’ve been sent to be an incarnational and organic messengers of love to the lost people around us. But, how do we lead that kind of a movement? Here are some inflammatory comments.



Many times Christian leaders spend the majority of their time building better bubbles. Have you heard of the Christian bubble? Sometimes we become a separate community with it's own language, social codes, and art. As leaders, it's really tempting to put our energy into improving our bubble so that it is more comfortable and helpful for church people. In world history, impoverished and oppressed ethnic groups have often gathered in (or been forced into) urban ghettos that have little connection to the outside culture. In the ghetto people get along together, but are foreigners in the rest of the city that surrounds them. Instead of being the salt of the earth as Jesus commented, we're often ghettoized like salt stuck in a salt shaker. Instead of being the light of the world, we're exactly as Jesus warned, the light under the bucket (Matthew 5:15).

A Closer Look at Better Bubbles

In the past we've accepted the 'build a better bubble' concept as very clear thinking. The idea was that that as we build a larger, healthier group we'll have the resources to reach the whole campus. Unfortunately, this only happened a few dozen times out of the 2000 CCC student ministries over the last 50 years - and almost never on a commuter campus. We discovered that a larger group means more activities and more student leaders to manage those activities. We called them small group leaders, worship teams, or servant teams who plan socials and set up worship slides. All of these people, had to be skilled, motivated, and have the time available to serve. The sad discovery is that even in rare best-case-scenarios there are significant groups of people (ethnic minority groups, athletes, artists, left leaning political students) who feel the big group is not for them, the group is not 'local' to them in the sense that we used above.

We've had the tendency to expect new believers to become deeply involved in our community quickly. They were 'extracted' from their relational network and have ended up with a whole new set of friends, social events, and music/culture. The rapid explosion of the Christian community that Jesus saw with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) or that Paul saw with Lydia (Acts 16:14), are impossible for us because new believers become quickly alienated to their old friends. Instead of outreach, we have 'in-drag'. A funny thing about the way the church often operates is it's attractational approach. Instead of incarnating the gospel to a group of people as Christ did with us, we often stand back and try to attract people to come to us across a relational gap. We've said, 'come to us' when Jesus said 'go' to them. To reach skaters, for instance, a set of skater oriented products and services are created. A Christian skater speaker is recruited, fliers with skateboards on them are produced, and the outreach is held – often on the Christian's turf at their church. Several times we've used the word 'organic'. Basically we're saying 'not institutional'. What's an institution?

Institutions are what happen to movements after the fire burns out. There is a period of exciting explosive growth where there is lots of creativity, messiness, and risk taking. Then, leadership attempts to stabilize the organization by creating programs, policies, and lots of planning meetings. This causes two awful things. First the organization becomes incapable of reproducing itself because the model is too cumbersome and complicated to be replanted close to the unreached corners of the campus. Second, the organization becomes



self-obsessed and the best leaders spend most of their time on inward focused activities to maintain the group — not building relationships with lost people, modeling Live with Christ to new believers, and pursuing Christ themselves. In a word — TRAGIC.

An Alternative: Incarnational Communities

Leading a missional community is not easy, but it is simple once you make the jump from planning to replicate church on campus to planning to build on missional values for incarnational, local, and organic movement building. Let's go back to our illustration on reaching skaters:

The missional approach would be to start by buying a skateboard, learning to skate a little and becoming a skater. You'd bring a Christian friend along with you and start praying for your new skater friends and meeting together to study the Word in a place that's normal to skaters - possibly the library steps. With your friend, you'd hang out with skaters a lot, make an attempt to learn their lingo, and go out of your way to care for the needs with practical demonstrations of love. You'd share the gospel with them as you do life with them. By God's grace, you'd start a seeker's group to discover Jesus together. You'd disciple new skater believer, and encourage them to reach out deeper into their group by starting their own little prayer groups. As a missional group you might even work for skater justice 'skating is not a crime'. The skater Christians see themselves as missional people too. So, eventually, they make the sacrificial move to the uncomfortable cross-cultural space and do the same thing with the computer engineering students or others.

The obvious danger for the missionary is to become labeled a poser. Don't be inauthentic, just be yourself but demonstrate that you value the culture of the group by really allowing yourself to appreciate and enjoy the things that they like. You don't need to become one of them just to build a bridge and hang out. It almost goes without saying, that even to reach all the skaters on campus, you'd need several groups that were focused on bringing them the gospel - simply because students are busy and not everyone can meet up at the same time. To multiply, our pipes must be simple. We'll need to keep our typical meeting simple so that new leaders can easily take the idea to a new group of people.

Imagine

Imagine a large group of students, gathering on campus. They spend about a third of their time together in prayer for their campus, about a third of the time sharing from the Word either in small groups or as one of them shares a message, and about a third discussing how their reaching out to the lost students around them. That gathering happens once a month. In between the large group meetings small groups of students are meeting in spaces that are normal to their lost friends - three of them on a fraternity house porch, five in an engineering class room, three in a freshman dorm, four at Starbucks across from school - whatever space is normal to those they are praying to reach. They're hanging out with their lost friends and serving them with practical



demonstrations of love - like cleaning the fraternity house, tutoring struggling engineering students, taking freshmen out for some healthy fun, and inviting coffee shop friends out to a film like "Narnia". And, when they meet they're following that simple pattern of prayer, sharing their spiritual lives, and discussing their outreach plans. Along the way, lost students are curious about the little group and spiritual conversations happen, some leading to genuine interest, so seekers are invited to visit the groups and learn about Jesus. The groups grow because other existing Christians are attracted to the intimate relationships and support they see in the groups. And, they groups grow with new Christians from the fraternity, classroom, dorm, and coffee shop. The large group is still gathering as coordinators email to announce the next big gathering.

At-A-Glance Comparison

Attractional Institutional Bubbles

Members

Are consumers shopping for the best services
 Are viewed by leaders as 'end users' who receive services
 Some members will take 'higher calling' to fill leadership gaps and maintain the group

Organization/Leadership

Is established and hopefully growing
 Can be focused primarily inward
 Is located in sacred space separate from society at large
 Expanding sophistication and programs
 Group members serve the group's needs

Outreach

Members 'go out' to do evangelism
 Converts enter new believer program and are extracted from old social network

In-drag, attractional 'come to us'
 Happens on believer's turf

Vision

Reach those we can attract with the gospel
 Growth and maintenance of the organization
 Make the bubble better

Initial Focus

Individual Converts
 Large group meeting - celebration

Incarnational Organic Movements

View selves as 'sent' and on a mission
 View selves as 'Midpoint' planters who pass on the mission
 All members are empowered and trained to multiply the group into new communities

Is in motion and giving birth to new communities
 Is focused outward and inward
 Is located in the normal space of the target audience
 Simplicity that can be easily learned and reproduced
 Group serves the community & individual needs around them

Members are relational evangelists along the way in real life with Power of Presence
 Converts remain in their social networks adding in the organic Christian community that befriended and discipled them
 Organic Incarnational Witness 'go to them'
 Happens on the turf and context of the lost person

Take the gospel to those who aren't believers and live it out with acts of service and love
 Reproduction of the organization into new communities
 Make the bubble permeable and reproduce it

Persons of Peace and Group conversions
 Cell fellowship and seeker discovery groups

Little or none of this article is original thinking. We are indebted to the experimentation, scholarship, and faith of the following authors and leaders.

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