

THE CHURCH IN, TO AND WITH THE CITY

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There are three distinct responses that any church or mission can make to its community. The response the church chooses to make will decide whether that church will play a significant role in the building of the power of the people, will provide social services, will concentrate upon evangelizing or will simply ignore the people around it. What are those three responses that determine the kind of transformation your church is seeking to accomplish?

The Church *In* the Community

The first response of the church to its neighborhood or city is to see itself as being *in* but not *of* that community. In such a situation, that church does not feel any particular attachment to or responsibility for the neighborhood around it. It is simply physically present in that community. Where it is located simply happens to be the place where its brick and mortar happen to meet the ground.

Most churches fall into this category. And they will tend to fall into that category for one of two reasons.

Some churches that fall into this category are there because of their theology. Their theology sees no connection between their existence as a congregation and the existence of the community around them. They have no significant outreach to the community around them (except, perhaps, in trying to woo people out of that community to Christ and into their church). Rather, they perceive the church as a ship on the ocean of life, rescuing people out of that ocean and into the safety of their ship. Therefore, that church's members drive furtively into the community, park in the church's parking lot and scurry into the safety of their church building

where they worship God, study scripture and fellowship together, and then hurry back out to their cars to drive out of the neighborhood and think of it no longer.

Other churches fall into this category because the community has changed around them. In earlier days, they may have been significantly engaged with that community. But then the neighborhood began to change racially, ethnically, economically or religiously. As that neighborhood began to change, the people who had lived in that neighborhood and who went to that church began to move out. So, increasingly, the church became a commuter congregation with people traveling into the city and into that neighborhood in order to attend that church, but whose lives are lived out in another community. Whenever, for example, you see a white church in a black community, that is a sure sign that this phenomenon I have just presented has occurred.

Whether a church is only physically present but is unengaged in its community because of theological reasons (the first example) or for demographic and sociological reasons (the second example), the result is still the same. The result is that this church has no stake, no psychological ownership toward and no spiritual connection with its community. It is, as I said earlier, just the happenstance place where that church's bricks and mortar meet the pavement. It could just as easily be located somewhere else.

The Church *To* the Community

The second response of a church or mission organization is to be a church *to* its community. Only a minority of churches fall into this category, but most have gotten there through one of two ways.

Some churches are churches *to* their community because of their theology. That is, they belong to a denomination (e.g., Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Roman Catholic)

or hold to a theology (e.g., Reformed, Calvinist, Wesleyan, Lutheran, Thomistic, Augustinian) that stresses the church's engagement in public life. That denomination or that theological position has always taught that the local church bears a significant responsibility toward the community around it (e.g., perceiving the community as its parish). Out of its theological or ecclesiastical presuppositions, therefore, such a church will believe that it is their privilege and obligation, as the body of Christ, to be seeking the transformation of its community.

Other churches will embrace the response of the church *to* their community out of enlightened self-interest. Although that church, in the past, might have been isolated from its community and simply "minded its own business", it might come to the realization that as the community changes, if they don't begin to reach out to that neighborhood, they will eventually die. As the neighborhood around that church changes and the church's members move from the neighborhood to distant suburbs but continue to commute back out of loyalty, the church begins to realize that such loyalty is only one generation deep; that generation's adult children are going to go to churches near their homes, not commute back to the old congregation. Therefore, if the church is to have any future at all, it is going to have to find some way of reaching out to its immediate neighborhood and bringing those new neighbors into the life of that church. So the church begins to become concerned about its city, its neighborhood and its problems.

However a church arrives at becoming the church *to* the community – whether that is through its theology, its denominational mission perspective or its self-interest -- the point is that the church comes to that conclusion. In doing so, it has adopted a much more holistic approach because of the recognition that the church must be present to the people around it and must be concerned both with evangelism and social action. It is inadequate to be concerned with the souls of the people around the church (that is, rescuing them from hell and bringing them into the

safety of the church-boat) unless the church is also going to be concerned about the social and economic needs of the people, as well.

There is great potential in this kind of approach. But there is also a fatal flaw! The Achilles heel of this approach is the perception that the church knows what is best for that neighborhood. Those Christians look at their neighborhood and say, “Look at all these pagans here; what they need is to receive Christ. Let’s hold a revival meeting or let’s open a coffee house in order to get community residents under our roof, and then let’s share the gospel with them!” The church says, “Look at all these poor people here; what these people need is a youth program for their teenagers to get them off the streets.” Or the church looks at the number of senior citizens sitting on their porches and it says, “What our church needs to do is to develop a ministry to senior citizens.”

Do you see the common element in all these diverse ministries? The common element is that *the church decides what is best for the community!* The church determines what the ministry ought to be that will reach out to and transforms the lives of the people of that community.

But this flies directly in the face of the Iron Rule: “Never do for others what they can do for themselves!” A primary assumption of ministries that empower is the recognition that the people who are best able to deal with a problem are the people most affected by that problem. The people best able to deal with teenagers running amok in their neighborhood, for example, are the people who live in that neighborhood.

Now, although that seems self-evident, I have discovered in more than 50 years of ministry *that this concept is the single most difficult insight for Christians to grasp and apply to their ministry!* We can understand it intellectually and affirm it, but it is extremely hard for

Christians to implement that perspective in our own ministries. Instead, we want to do everything possible to do ministry *to* people.

Why do Christians have such a hard time applying the Iron Rule to the people to whom they minister? I believe it comes from our perception that, because we know the gospel – and we know it’s good for people – we know what is best for the community in all things! And no insight could be further from Biblical faith! So it is that we undertake ministry *to* people out of our “definitive” understanding of the needs of the community. And that, in turn, robs the people of that community from the responsibility of identifying and dealing with their own corporate problems.

When I was doing organizing in Detroit, some of the women in a local church with which I was working came to me to inform me that they were going to start an after-school program at their church for neighborhood children. “Have you talked with their parents about doing this,” I asked? “No,” they replied. “We don’t need to. Those children are always playing in the streets, right in front of our church. It’s obvious they don’t have anywhere to go or anything constructive to do. So they just chase each other in and around our parked cars. The need is obvious.” “Well, you should talk with their parents to see what they want,” I replied. But I realized I was speaking to a brick wall.

Well, the program began, using that church’s gym and dining hall. And it was a big success. It was set up to operate from 4:00 (when the children got out of school) until 7:00, Monday through Friday. The ladies wrote a grant to their denomination and got funding for it. They hired a director. And it was successful: nearly 100 children participated in the program.

But soon, things began to go wrong. Volunteers from the church were well intentioned, but after a few weeks of it, began not to show up. The trustees began complaining about the

wear-and-tear on the church building. A window got broken, and two gym lights – expensive to replace – got knocked out by a basketball (some felt, intentionally). The director quit in frustration.

Faced with the possible collapse of the program, the ladies called a meeting of all the parents of the children. “After all,” they said to me, “it’s their children who are receiving the benefit of this program. They should assume some responsibility for it.”

The night of the meeting came. The ladies had fixed great refreshments. And they gathered to meet with the parents. I thought it would be wise for me to be present. So I was.

None of the parents came! The ladies were shocked. A half hour after the meeting was to begin, I led them in an evaluation of the failed meeting. “It just shows you,” said one woman. “These people are irresponsible. They don’t care about this community. And they don’t care about their kids. All they want to do is to use the church and just take, take, take from us.”

I asked if anyone agreed with this outspoken woman. Every lady in the room agreed! So I said to them, “First of all, these people do care about this community. And they do care about their kids. They care as much about their kids as you care about yours.”

“Then why didn’t they come tonight?” one person asked.

“Would you come to a meeting of a program you didn’t want for your children?” I responded.

“Well, we’re just going to shut this program down,” the leader responded in frustration.

“Whether you should shut the program down or not, I wouldn’t know,” I responded. “But before you decide to act on this, I want to ask you to do something first – what I asked you to do in the first place. You owe it to yourself, to your church and to the denomination that provided the funding for this program to go and talk to the parents first. Will you do that?”

To my utter amazement, they agreed. We set a Saturday morning when they would all make these calls at the same time in teams of two. And I agreed to train them for these calls. So I did. And they did. On the assigned date, they all showed up and went out on their assigned one-on-ones.

When we all regathered at one o' clock for lunch, they had all completed their calls. I could tell they had learned the truth from the people, because they all arrived at the end of their calls, looking despondent. I asked, "What did you learn?"

The leader spoke up. "I learned that they have never wanted the program our church was offering. They just acquiesced to it because their kids saw it as something interesting to do."

"Why didn't they want the program?" I replied (already knowing the answer, because I had heard it from my individual meetings with these parents).

"They don't want it because they *want* their children playing on the street."

"Well, why would they want that?" I countered, playing Devil's Advocate. "After all, think of all the danger those kids are in from passing cars, playing on the street like they do."

"They want their kids playing on the streets," the leader responded, "because when the kids play on the streets, the mothers gather on one of their porches to supervise their children. And when they're all gathered together, they talk over the problems of the neighborhood and figure out what they need to do to deal with them!"

The church ladies had gotten the point; I was grateful to the parents for being honest in their answers. So I summarized this learning experience for the intended do-gooders of that congregation, "So in other words, what you are telling me is this: you perceived the children playing on the street as a problem. But in reality, that was the community's *solution* to a much bigger problem, which was how to come to decision regarding the substantive issues of the

community. And you would have found that out if you had taken the time to visit the parents about their hopes and ambitions for their children. So what you did was that you didn't solve a problem, at all. What you did was to solve a solution, and as a result, you created a much bigger problem!"

Thankfully, the ladies learned from this experience, and they eventually led that church into becoming one of the major players in the transformation of that neighborhood!

This story, however, reveals clearly the problem of doing ministry *to* a community and its people. The fate of any such program or project developed under the assumption of ministering to people is inevitable. It will function successfully only as long as the church or mission agency is willing to commit its people, money, materials and buildings to the program. But "burn-out" will eventually happen. And once programmatic exhaustion has set in, so that the well-intentioned pastor or mission executive can no longer raise sufficient money or resources or workers to maintain that program, it will die. And it will die because it has never been a project of the people. They never perceived it as their program, but rather a program of the church or mission agency. And because the people have no ownership in the program, they will always remain spectators and clients of it, never partners and goal-owners. Therefore, its death is inevitable.

It is not appropriate for the church – in fact, it is strategically a very bad thing – to look at its community and decide what it needs to do to that community in order to change that community. It is not appropriate because that approach is to perceive the community and its people as a client, as an object to be ministered to and the church as the subject – the only viable change agent in that community. Such an attitude is actually colonialist in nature, and reveals a paternalistic attitude toward people. And the inevitable result will be rejection by the people.

The church *with* the community.

The third response of the church in the city is to be the church *with* its community. There is a profound difference between being a church *in* or *to* a neighborhood, and being a church *with* its neighborhood. When a church takes this third approach, that church approaches its community with an entirely different mindset than when it is seeking to minister to people.

When a church seeks to minister *with* its community, it seeks to incarnate itself in that community. That church becomes flesh of the peoples' flesh and bone of the peoples' bone. It enters into the life of that community and becomes partners with the community in addressing that community's needs. That means the church allows the people of the community to instruct it as it identifies with the people. It respects those people and perceives them as being people of great wisdom and potential. Such a church joins with the people in dealing with the issues that the people have identified as their own. That is the approach in which the most authentic ministry is actually done.

The third response of the church – to be the church *with* the people of its neighborhood – is an approach that enables the church to join with the people in addressing the issues of that community, but doing so from the recognition that the only people who have the capability to change that community and to deal with its problems are the people of that community! The church comes alongside them, and supports them and works with them in that endeavor, sharing with those people the particular gifts and strengths the church has to contribute to that situation. It is that body of Christ that identifies with the people, casts its lot with the people, and works along with the people. But it cannot and will not do the people's work for them. Only the people can assume responsibility for their own empowerment. "Never do for others what they can do for themselves."

I often get asked the question, “How can the church empower the poor?” I love that question because it affords me the opportunity for a “teachable moment”. My response to that question is always as follows: “That is the wrong question. To ask that question that way is to tell me that you neither understand the nature of empowerment nor what are appropriate or inappropriate roles for the church to play.” Invariably, the question-asker will ask me to clarify and that will provide me with that “teachable moment”.

The question, “How can the church empower the poor” is the wrong question simply because *no one can empower another person!* The only person who can empower someone is the person himself. The only group that can empower a community is the community itself. Only you can take charge of your own situation. No one can take charge of it for you. The task of the church is not to empower its community. The task of the church is to join the empowerment of its community – to participate in it, to be an integral part of it, and perhaps even to participate in making it happen.

As we can see from this exploration, there are three essential responses of the church to its city:

- First, it can ignore the city and the needs of the people around it as it fixates on preserving its own life. *It can view itself as a fortress.*
- Second, it can provide evangelism and social services and do good works for and to the people in the city. *It can view itself as the savior of the community.*
- Third, it can provide leadership for, join and participate in the community’s struggle to determine for themselves what kind of community they want to have, a community with justice for all. *The church can view itself as a partner with the community.*

In the light of this exploration of the three responses of the church regarding their neighborhood is the truly important question, “What kind of a church are you going to be?” The future effectiveness of your church will lie in the way you choose to answer it!

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(Excerpted from Robert Linthicum’s forthcoming book, *Building A People of Power: Equipping Churches to Transform Their Communities* (Seattle, WA: World Vision Press, 2005).