

“Missional Community Essentials”

Mt. Laurel Evangelical Free Church
Love God, Love Others
mlefc.org

Outline:

- Why Missional Community?
- Missional Community Defined
- The Gospel Story
- More Than A Meeting
- The Importance of Proximity (dealing with suburban sprawl)
- Being on Mission Together
- Giving Birth To New Missional Communities

Part One: Why Missional Community?

Why not just call it a "Small Group" or a "Care Group" and be done with it? Because these labels come with some unwanted baggage. Typically these groups have been about study and to some degree fellowship. Good things, right? But where is the sense of being on mission? Where is the sense of living out the story we see in the pages of Acts? After reading the swashbuckling, Holy Spirit empowered, adventurous story of Acts we groan for more than the typical Christian life so many of us know today. I know I do.

I could explain the "Why Missional Community?" in many different ways, but let me give you two key reasons...

The Story of Scripture: We want to know what God is doing on earth and join him. What is God's Story? In Acts 2:42-47 we see the New Testament community committed to teaching, prayer, fellowship. We might be tempted to say that's what church is! But that would be only a partial description of the church, part of the story. The context for Acts 2 is a community on mission together. The teaching, fellowship and prayer is what sustains them as they are engaged in God's mission of redeeming creation for his own glory. Yes, God is doing the heavy lifting when it comes to the *missio dei*, but we are instruments in his hands. Too many Small Groups get the teaching, prayer and fellowship but have lost sight of the big picture, the story of God.

Our Identity as God's Family: We need to know and embrace our identity as described in God's Word. Here is a question. Why can't we just do the teaching, fellowship and prayer thing and leave being missional in the hands of our people? The key is that we are not merely individuals! The bible identifies us as the body of Jesus Christ, or as the family of God (Genesis 12:1-3, John 1:11-13, 1 Timothy 3:15). The church of America has done us a major disservice (unintentionally reinforcing a life of individualism) by merely putting together a weekly service and then allowing people to live their lives on their own for the rest of the week. As God's people, as God's family we are called to something more, something deeper.

Checklist for Missional Community Leaders:

- Are you able to articulate the missionary movement of God from Genesis to Revelation?
- Do you understand and are you able to articulate how the story of your life is radically different because of the missionary movement of God from Genesis to Revelation?
- All of our activity as a Missional Community flows out of our identity as the family of God. In very practical terms explain what difference it makes for your Missional Community to understand their identity as being part of God's family?

Part Two: Missional Community Defined

“The first thing to say is that a gospel community (Missional Community) is not a meeting. It is a group of people who are committed to Jesus and committed to one another, sharing their lives together and sharing mission together. It is about people hanging out together, doing chores together, eating together, and serving in the neighborhood – all with gospel intentionality. That intentionality includes both a commitment to discipling one another with the gospel and sharing the gospel with unbelievers – all in the context of ordinary life and shared life. It’s not a meeting you attend. It’s not a thing you do. It’s who you are. It’s your identity. It’s your place of belonging.” –Tim Chester

A Missional Community is NOT primarily:

- A Care Group
- A Small Group
- A Cell Group
- A Bible Study
- A Support Group
- A Social Activist Group
- A Weekly Meeting

A Missional Community most likely will "do" some of the things associated with these groups (like bible study and supporting one another). All of these "groups" can be good things in the life of the church! Missional Community is a group of people who are serious about discipleship and yet know that making disciples includes actively following Christ (living as sent people) into our broken and hurting world.

Checklist for Missional Community Leaders:

- There is no question we are setting the bar high when it comes to being a disciple of Jesus Christ. Don’t be discouraged when your Missional Community does not live up to this definition; instead use it as a guide and a target for where you want to go!
- Have you communicated to each person in your group the definition of a Missional Community?

Part Three: The Gospel Story

It is one thing for us to say that the gospel needs to be part of our church life, our Missional Communities, but what does it actually look like? How do you do it? Is it simply quoting sections of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John to people? Do we do it by teaching "gospel" as a topic in an Adult Bible Fellowship class? We certainly may do all these things but somehow we need to work the gospel into every area of our lives!

Tim Chester uses this little phrase to describe what the gospel looks like in Missional Community, "**ordinary life with gospel intentionality.**" Here is the break down...

Ordinary Life

The context for church, mission, community, discipleship, pastoral care, training, growth is ordinary life. Shopping, chores, meals, sports, journeys. This is how Jesus did discipleship and community: walking along the road or around a meal. See also Deuteronomy 6:4-7 and 1 Thessalonians 2:8.

Shared life

It is also about doing ordinary life together – having our lives intersect. So we're not talking about house groups or small groups. Home groups are usually a meeting. You have 'home group night'. It's an event. We're talking about a community of people who share life together.

Gospel Intentionality

Gospel intentionality is the mentality or habit or culture in which, as you share lives, you look for opportunities to talk about Jesus, to encourage, to challenge, to pray, to praise. Without this all you are doing is ordinary life and everyone does that!

What does this mean for us and our church family?

- **The gospel must be lived out in the context of meaningful relationships.** We can talk about the gospel in a Sunday School class (or sermons) till we are blue in the face, but unless we see how the gospel connects with us in the chaos of everyday life it will be a vague, abstract theology that fails to bring transformation. Understanding this helps us to see why Missional Communities are so key in the first place! We need the constant encouragement, support and accountability of other brothers and sisters to live a gospel centered life.

- **Continually emphasizing that the gospel is more than the good news that saved us, it is the life of Christ in us.** If the gospel is just what saved us we are going to fail to connect it with the stuff of daily life; which will leave us powerless and busy playing a religious game.

Checklist for Missional Community Leaders:

- Are you able to articulate the gospel to others?
- Are you able to explain how the gospel helps us, empowers us in everyday life?
- Are you growing in your love for Jesus? Are the members of your Missional Community?
- When you study a book of the bible do you see how it points to the gospel? Are you helping your Missional Community to make these connections?
- Is your Missional Community connecting with people in your neighborhood(s) and introducing them (word and deed) to the gospel?

Part Four: More Than A Meeting

We have already defined a Missional Community as...

“The first thing to say is that a gospel community (Missional Community) is not a meeting. It is a group of people who are committed to Jesus and committed to one another, sharing their lives together and sharing mission together. It is about people hanging out together, doing chores together, eating together, and serving in the neighborhood – all with gospel intentionality. That intentionality includes both a commitment to discipling one another with the gospel and sharing the gospel with unbelievers – all in the context of ordinary life and shared life. It’s not a meeting you attend. It’s not a thing you do. It’s who you are. It’s your identity. It’s your place of belonging.” –Tim Chester

From the above description it is clear that Missional Community is much more than a weekly gathering. Care Groups, Small Groups are traditionally good times where people meet to study God's Word, pray, fellowship, etc...

One of the shortcomings of these meetings is that, well, they are a meeting! Trust me, I know the temptation is intense to get together with your Care Group on Wednesday night for a couple hours and mentally check "community" off the church to-do list. God's Word is calling us to something much deeper, something more profound than a weekly meeting. The gospel is calling us to share our lives, which is going to require a new way of living. I intentionally used the phrase "new way of living" to help us understand that in many ways this is a call to **reboot the way we are living the Christian life, the way we are doing church.**

Is this hard? Absolutely! Will it mean changing the priorities of our family, our life? You bet. It goes against the church culture many of us have been raised in. The exciting thing is that I sense there are a growing number of people who are hungry for something more from church.

Checklist for Missional Community Leaders:

- Do you model "community" by opening up your life and your house during the week to members of your Missional Community?
- Are people doing ordinary life together? Going for walks, coffee, watching football games, meals, talking, etc...
- Do you see people in your Missional Community carrying one another's burdens beyond the weekly prayer time?
- If you sense your Missional Community has gotten into the rut of becoming a weekly meeting, what can you personally do to encourage deeper relationships?

Part Five: The Importance of Proximity (Dealing With Suburban Sprawl)

By now we all recognize that suburbia can lead to a life of isolation, which means we are going to have to work harder to create an environment where church life is not relegated to a weekly event or programming. We need to create a real, thriving sense of community among people who are busy, living life without any margins, yet were created by God to be in community with other brothers and sisters in Christ.

The primary organizing principle for our Missional Communities is simply this, living in close proximity to one another.

For some this may sound incredibly simplistic, but I can't tell you how many churches I have been a part of that built their Care/Small Group Ministry around stage of life, married or single, etc...The fact is this, if we don't live close to each other than the possibility of living life together on mission will never be anything more than an elusive pipe dream.

I will finish by telling you how this has played out in a Missional Community that my wife and I currently lead. We have built relationships with two families in our suburban neighborhood and in the process, we are happy to say, that they have joined our Missional Community. Because of the fact that they live so close (one lives right behind us) my wife and the two other moms are able to frequently go for walks early in the morning. This may sound like a little thing, but in this relational context there is an opportunity for meaningful friendships to be developed. How likely is this going to occur if we live 40 minutes away from each other? Not very likely.

So when people at our church ask how they should go about determining which Missional Community to be a part of my first question now is, "where do you live?"

Checklist for Missional Community Leaders:

- How far apart do the members of your Missional Community live?
- Is your proximity to one another a hindrance or a help when it comes to sharing life together during the week?
- What would you tell a person who lives 30 minutes away that they would like to join your Missional Community?

Part Six: Being On Mission Together

"We no longer need haphazard gospel sharing that is not supported by visible community. We need much more than good sermons, big buildings, and professional video presentations. We need a people committed to specific places who are called to bring redemption to those places."
-Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community That Makes A Difference In The World by Scott Boren

Why do mission together?

- **Our identity is rooted in the fact that we are family, not merely individuals who attend church on Sunday** (Genesis 12:1-3, John 1:11-13, 1 Timothy 3:15). We want to resist the cultural pull that would have us live isolated lives throughout the week.
- **Our witness to the world is connected to how the world sees us living in community and loving one another.** Jesus says this in John 13:35, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

How can we do mission together?

- **As a Missional Community talk and pray about how God wants you to engage your neighborhood with the love of Jesus Christ.** Volunteering at local ministries or city events, acts of kindness, serving your neighbors, etc... I think all of these are great ideas, but I also believe that the gospel is **compelling us towards relationships** with people outside our church walls. A great example of relationship building would certainly be the life of Jesus Christ. Jesus went to people. Jesus went to those who were hurting and broken. We need to prayerfully ask God as a Missional Community where we can go so that we can bring love and redemption to those places and to those people.

Checklist for Missional Community Leaders:

- Fundamental question, do you have God's heart for your suburban neighborhood? If not, immerse yourself in the gospel and seek hard after God in prayer.
- What do you think is your neighborhoods greatest need?
- Has your Missional Community identified a specific way that together you can engage your neighborhood with the love of Jesus Christ?
- Why is relationship so critical when it comes to communicating the gospel?
- Does your Missional Community know the biblical rationale behind why they are doing mission together?
- What are practical ways you can encourage your Missional Community towards being on mission together?
- Accept the fact that the transition (from traditional Care Group to Missional Community) will not happen quickly or easily! Be patient, be loving and lead the way by getting your family involved in your neighborhood.

Part Seven: Giving Birth To New Missional Communities

- **We need to identify the barriers to multiplication so that we know how to overcome them**
 - It's hard to multiply. People like each other. People are comfortable with one another. These are legitimate and understandable barriers, but I think the primary reason we fail to multiply Missional Communities is a lack of VISION. **At MLEFC we want to spread Missional Communities throughout South Jersey so that the gospel can reach into the nooks and crannies of our suburban world.** In order to for this vision to flourish we need to have a kingdom mindset which means we see beyond our needs, our comforts and seek to spread the gospel through new Missional Communities being launched.
 - Increasingly we want our shared life, our Missional Communities to be an entry point for people outside the church to come and be a part of our church family and to experience the gospel.
- **Talk about multiplication often**
 - Start your Missional Community with the idea that you are going to multiply and talk about it with your group members from time to time.
- **Must have an apprentice!**
 - Multiplying simply won't happen if we do not take the time to invest in someone to ultimately lead their own Missional Community. I know, this is easier said than done. **How do you find an apprentice?**
 - Pray for one.

- Most likely there is a person in your group who has the ability to lead. Begin to talk to them about the idea of leading a group. Give them opportunities to lead and use their spiritual gifts.
- Begin talking to them about a time/date when they and the group is ready to multiply.
- When the time comes celebrate the birth of the new Missional Community. Our Missional Community has multiplied twice, and it is always a little awkward and a bit sad, but remind the group that it is a celebration of what God has been doing in your lives.

Checklist for Missional Community Leaders:

- Have you identified and begun investing in someone in your group that will be able to eventually start a new Missional Community?
- Have you given your apprentice opportunities to lead?
- Does your group know that multiplication will happen and the reason, the VISION for it?
- Does your apprentice understand that they are to lead their group in a deeper love for God, a deeper love for one another and a deeper love for those who do not yet know Christ in their neighborhoods?

Sources used:

- Bible
- Tim Chester
- Scott Boren
- GCM Collective
- Soma Community