

Growing a church or impacting a community

– Dan Reiland.

One thing that troubles me when I see churches become larger is that the communities in which they serve don't seem to change much. I've been asking myself why? Am I just idealistic? Perhaps even naive? I don't think so. But if I am, I will remain that way with hopes of seeing the church truly reform the communities in which we live.

Actually I think I'm a realist, with a positive attitude. I don't think my church will change the world. But I must believe it can change my community. If God is who He says He is, and Jesus did what the Bible says He did, we can change the areas where we live! And together we can change the world.

At first I thought it was the difference between a small town, and a large city. It made sense that in smaller towns the churches might have more influence on the culture. It also seemed like the large cities were just not conquerable. But culture in general, independent of church influence, reveals that many small towns change slower (if at all) than large cities, especially during crisis. For example in Florida, when a hurricane comes through and destroys entire trailer parks, they rebuild them exactly like they were, right in the same place. In contrast, large cities like New York after 9/11, the community has been changed forever. They live different, think different and will never be the same.

I've also thought it might be a small church, large church issue. I do think there is substantial truth to the potentially greater impact of larger churches because of their resources, but there doesn't seem to be enough evidence to make a case for this.

It is tempting to say it's all about leadership, but it's not that simple. There are great leaders who are not reaching their community, and average leaders who are.

You may find what seem like hair-splitting ideas in this article, but read it through in order to think with me about the differences between growing a church and impacting a community. I will admit this can seem like nuance and spin, but I believe that at the core there is something to this idea. I've been thinking about it for awhile and I'm convinced that it is something worth a few minutes of consideration through your leadership eyes. If you have time, send me your thoughts. If nothing else, join me in my passion to change lives and truly impact communities.

- **You grow a church with talent and leadership. You impact a community with compassion.**

Churches that are blessed with talent (musical or otherwise) and great leadership are likely to grow. Most of these churches are considered good churches and in many ways they are. But that doesn't mean the community has been changed - which for me is the mark of a great church. In my thinking, it is impact that matters. This does not discount the huge significance and eternal value of growing churches that are big because of new converts. I'm talking about a kind of impact that not only wins people to Christ, but that does so with such impact that the community takes notice and is changed.

Now let me dance on thin ice. First, know that I have and will continue to give my life to Great Commission ministry. I'm all about people coming to Christ. But there is a corporate force that will enable us to ultimately win more to Christ if we have better served our communities. This means we must get involved in things that the community values, not just what we care about.

I believe this all begins with compassion. Churches who reach out with servant oriented efforts that will not ultimately result in anyone coming to their church demonstrate compassion that has true impact. I believe that the best way to do this is to prayerfully think through the various services in your community that did not originate from your church, and choose to serve and financially resource them.

Skyline Church, led by Pastor Jim Garlow did just that. About a year ago there were severe and devastating fires in San Diego County. Hundreds of people from Skyline (and other churches)

jumped in to help. By actually fighting fires, and providing food and housing, they dropped what they were doing and jumped in with all their hearts. Dozens of testimonies chimed in the same way: "We can't believe that church did so much for us." That is community impact.

- **You grow a church on your terms. You reach a community on their terms.**

I love movies where the "bad guys" are in complex and suspenseful negotiations with the "good guys". One such movie was *The Rock* with Sean Connery and Nicholas Cage. Mercenaries had hostages on Alcatraz Island and there were bombs aimed at San Francisco. The FBI, and everyone else imaginable, was involved to negotiate the demands. The suspense and tension grew as the negotiations determined who was really in control of the terms.

Who sets the terms matters. If your church insists that everyone you connect with must do so on your terms, you may grow your church, but you won't impact the community. This is not about sloppy theology, going "liberal", or abusing grace. It's about a willingness to adapt your church's attitudes and behaviors, including receptivity to people who aren't like you, in order that more un-churched people may be willing to try you out and even come back.

- **You grow a church by offering good programs. You reach a community by offering good relationships.**

Good programs are important. Especially, a strong children's program for example. But if programs are the focus, people will come and people will go. You can test if you are program oriented or relationship oriented by the decisions you make and the actions you take.

Crossroads has a parking problem. It's good to have more cars than we have space to park them, but it also creates havoc both on the neighborhood street as well as the main highway. Our parking team is like the Green Beret, but there is only so much even heroes can do. We have police officers and a number of parking attendants each service just to make it work. On rare occasion we've had so many cars that we were blocking the residents from leaving their homes.

Because our desire is for good relationships we chose to completely re-think our parking strategy, beef up the police support, communicate the issue to our people, and make personal visits to the homes with apologies and gift baskets. This went a long way to fix the problem and mend the relationships.

When you emphasize relationships and extend yourself to the community, you have potential to change the community.

- **You grow a church by investing in yourself. You invest outside yourselves to reach a community.**

More and more churches in the past few years have been following God's lead to make direct expressions of compassion in their community in very tangible ways.

With food banks, medical clinics children's homes, help to un-wed mothers and so much more, the community sees major dollars and time investment flowing out of the church, not just into the church. This makes a huge difference!

We at Crossroads are having a blast listening to God's prompts in these compassionate ministries. We are gearing up for our next one right now to help build a house with Habitat for Humanity. It's heartwarming to see the tangible impact of this kind of investment in the community.

- **You can grow a church on history and tradition. You must become relevant to impact a community.**

Let me close with a few thoughts on relevance versus history and tradition. We know history and tradition is good. Some of the church's most sacred elements come from the richness of history and tradition. The point is not to throw them out, but first be relevant in order to reach the community.

I don't mean to pick on any churches here, but some of the sermon titles I see on church marquis are embarrassing. We are not connecting with people when we communicate in church code about things that don't matter to people's lives.

Then when some churches do get people in the doors they hear sermons about Paul's missionary journeys and some obscure law in Leviticus. These people have gotten out of bed, fought to get the kids ready, sat in an unfamiliar setting, and we give them stuff that has nothing to do with their life. That is in fact, a perfect description of irrelevant.

A young pastor I had been coaching a few days before the 9/11 tragedy called me a couple days after the attack and asked me if he should continue his series on the book of Romans or speak on the issue of the terrorist attack. By all means, yes, use the Bible, but speak on the relevant topic! We must be relevant to reach and impact our community

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