

Chapter Eight

The Role of the Local Church in Community Transformation

Cam Roxburgh

“...and they enjoyed the favor of all the people.”

Acts 2:47

Sitting on a park bench at 10:30 am on a Sunday was not my usual habit. But on this Sunday in August 1992, there I was. We had left our previous church and moved into the neighbourhood where we would be starting a “new church plant.” At 27, I was naïve enough to think I could pull this off, yet aware I needed help.

As we sat on the bench I could see a man making his way across the field towards us. While I didn’t feel particularly social, my dog certainly did. After petting her, the man assumed he was invited to sit on the bench with us. How do I get out of this?

After exchanging names, he offered me a beer. In fact he had 24 of them under his arm. It looked like it might be a long conversation. Drinking beer has not been my favourite pastime, particularly at 10:30 on a Sunday morning. So I declined but asked him where he lived. I discovered that Ed had been kicked out of his house by his wife only four days before on account of his drinking.

“Where are you staying now, Ed?”

“I have been sleeping in the dumpster behind the Shell station two blocks away.” he replied.

I remember the next sentence out of my mouth as if I uttered it less than five minutes

ago.

“ Well, Ed. I am the pastor of a church that will be meeting at the building right down the street from the Shell station. Why don't you come by the office one morning and let me buy you breakfast?”

With that, I left. I had wanted to be quiet on this morning and it seemed a good opportunity to leave. I got to the corner of the park and then it happened. I have seen movies before where lightning strikes someone who has just done something to upset God. I could wish that had happened. It may have been less painful. Instead God stopped me straight in my tracks and, as with a laser, spoke into my heart with clarity I had never experienced.

“If you think that you are going to plant a church in this neighbourhood with an attitude and lack of love like that, you are sorely mistaken. You had better learn to love those that I love.”

I didn't go back and lead Ed to the Lord. I was crushed and rightly so. That kind of attitude was and is and evermore will be, inappropriate for any believer, let alone one who thinks they are going to plant a church. But one thing did happen that day. I committed to the Lord that I would change and that our church – whatever it would be called, would learn to love those that God loves so deeply. That one event has shaped us as much as any other - if not more.

Goal: We will be a church who loves those who have not yet met Jesus.

In the months following that day at the park I had been doing informal surveys of established churches in the area and become discouraged by what I found. All were churches who met in the neighbourhood but all of their members drove in from other places. So I asked what each church was doing to reach the neighbourhood. “Nothing... absolutely nothing”.

We were not going to be like that. As we shaped our values, vision, and mission, we were conscious of a deep call on us as a church to be a neighbourhood church that many people would walk to and be impacted by. After all, our ecclesiology has never been that church is a building, but that we are a people that lives out our faith in the neighbourhood. So, we moved in. Some bought homes in the neighbourhood while others rented. But we were there.

Conviction: To reach the neighbourhood, we must live in the neighbourhood.

In those days we probably could not have articulated it as we do today, but another belief was growing within us: the gospel needs to be communicated through *community* for the story to be told.

One day I was sitting at my dining room table with a friend who didn't know Christ. We were talking about all of the evidence in society that indicate the values and morals of our culture were going downhill in a hurry. In fairness, we were both probably a little afraid more for the lives of our kids and what they were facing than we were for ourselves. At one point in the conversation I said,

“Timothy. When will it stop? Is there no end to how far our society can sink?”

He responded. “Cam, it will only stop when there is a group of people who learn to live together in such a way that their values and morals are seen to be so attractive that others all around them will want to become a part of them.”

I choked up as I responded.

“Timothy, that is what the church is supposed to be like.”

It has become a deep conviction that part of the gospel needs to not just be told, but *shown* as God’s people live out in a neighbourhood what it means to be the people of God together.

Belief: The Good News of Jesus includes the fact that we are invited into the family of God to live in community with new brothers and sisters. This way of living will be attractive to those who don’t yet know Christ.

Since 1992, when there were just a handful of people, we have sought to live out the call to serve and transform neighbourhoods. In 1997, we started a new congregation in a neighbourhood fifteen minutes away. In 2000, both congregations multiplied and we started two more in two new neighbourhoods. It has not been easy by any stretch of the imagination, but we will continue to live out the call to transform neighbourhoods. In 2005 we are planning for 2 more launches into new neighbourhoods. We believe deeply that we are called to reach people who do not know Christ, but that we are also to work for neighbourhood transformation. This is part of the Good News.

My prayer is that others who read this chapter will catch a passion for transforming their neighbourhoods and grow bold and creative in ways in which that may be done.

Biblical Basis

There are a number of texts that have spoken into the life of our church as we have lived out this journey of reaching our four neighbourhoods. It is one thing to have a “great plan and strategy.” We have learned that it is another to live out of our biblical convictions.

Acts 2:47

I am sure most reader will have preached or heard a sermon on Acts 2:42-47. So had we. But I had missed the nugget near the end of the passage where Luke reports the early church “... enjoyed the favour of all the people.”

Is this true in our country? Does the church enjoy the favour of the people in the neighbourhood? How many times do we hear from those we work with or live near, that they don’t mind having conversations about God, but, whatever you do, “don’t bring up the church.” The church across our land needs to work hard to be the authentic people of God in a place and be seen to living out the call of God so that we enjoy the favour of the people.

Some time ago students in our intern program were doing a community survey. As part of the survey they entered a coffee shop and sat down next to a man from the neighbourhood. They began to ask him questions about what drew the neighbourhood together. His said that there was a little blue church down on the corner that was the catalyst. Through all kinds of events and through reputation this church had drawn the community together and given them hope. He didn’t go to

a church yet, but if he ever did, he would go there.

It felt like we had been given a million bucks. We were beginning to enjoy the favour of some of our neighbours.

John 1:14

I made a discovery recently that has encouraged me a great deal. As I was preaching on the wonderful text in John 1 - at Christmas time, I believe - I came across a commentary giving much insight about what John meant when he said that they had seen the "Glory" of God (1:14). Eugene Peterson expresses the first part of the verse in the Message this way:

The word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood.

What John meant when he declared they had seen His glory was not only that they were witnesses to Jesus moving into the neighbourhood but also, because they had seen this, they were compelled to go and do likewise. They were called to live lives that "moved into the neighbourhood."

Jeremiah 29:1-10

There may be no passage that speaks to the church in Canada as this passage does. The Jews are ripped out of their homeland by the Babylonians. Painful. Disastrous. No hope in sight. They must have been asking where had God been in all of this. When do we get to go home?

There were some false prophets around that were spreading the news that the Jews should not worry because in two years God was going to take them home. "Don't settle down, but rather rejoice that you will soon be set free."

Jeremiah had something else to say. I can imagine the passion with which he would have spoken the words to be conveyed to his friends now in Babylon. They were not to listen as the false prophets spun them a line. In fact, it was God who allowed the Jews to be carried off due to their unfaithfulness. Now in Babylon, the exile would not be a short one. But God had a plan for His people. They were to build homes and move into the neighbourhood. They were to marry their sons and daughters, to have kids and show the Babylonians that they were settling and not just that they were on vacation. They were to grow the food of the land and learn to eat in that place. They were to be hospitable. They were to work hard, not just so that they could get ahead, but so that the Babylonians would prosper. (Gulp). And finally, they were to pray for peace in that place. Literally, to pray for God's presence to be there.

Many suggest the church in the West is in exile today. Pushed not only to the fringe of society, but frankly right off of the map, the church has lost its place at the center of society where it was only a few generations ago. Exile is an appropriate term.

The Church in the West is in the same place. We are not in Jerusalem. But we need to stop trying to go back and create a Christian society. Instead, we need to learn what it means to be followers of Jesus in the midst of this secular society. According to this passage it must be that we learn to live in a foreign land as the

people of God.

And, actually, given a choice, I know what I'd find more exciting.

Acts 1:8

As I studied in leading evangelical schools I learned Acts 1:8 was about the Holy Spirit and charismatic gifts. Jesus had said to His disciples that they would receive power to be His witnesses. There is no question true but there is more. In Acts 1:8 Jesus is speaking to the disciples collectively; 'you' is plural. Jesus is also saying the Spirit of God will come upon His disciples as a community and the way they live together will be a witness to the fact that He is alive. We are His body. People everywhere are looking for a sign that Christ is alive and here is one of the major ones. This is why I was so excited when my friend Timothy made the statement that he did at my table. Collectively, the church will witness to those around them through the way they live together. What a great encouragement this passage is to the local church.

1 Peter 2:9

We need one more passage to show the importance of moving into and transforming neighbourhoods, one the church needs to hear day after day. We have allowed the culture around us to squeeze us into its mould and have lost sight of some of the key concepts of what it means to be the people of God. There are three concepts here that we must see, and learn to live out.

- a. Community – We are His people. We have the incredible privilege of being born again. This is so much more than a metaphor. According to 1 Peter 1:23-24, we were born of perishable seed, but now, as part of the family of God, we are born of imperishable seed. We have a new family tree, a new heritage. Our primary identity now comes not through our biological parents or the country we live in but rather through the fact that we are part of His family. This has so much to say to hurting, lonely people who have come from such dysfunctional families.
- b. Character – We need to see that we are a holy people, a nation of priests. If we are born again, we need to imitate our Father. In the same way as sons try to be like their dads, so we too need to be like our Father in Heaven. 1 Peter 1:15 declares we are to be holy because He is holy. We need to become people of obedience and character. How many times have we seen people turned off of Christianity because of the way they have seen Christians live? Are we not called hypocrites with painful frequency? We say one thing and do another. We are called to live out our life of faith through demonstrating character of the highest order.
- c. Cause – When Peter states we are a people belonging to God, he has one thing in mind - that we are to carry out the cause of Christ. God is missional and has invited us to join Him in what He is doing. We are called into His family, called to a new way of living, and given a brand new purpose in life: to be involved in fulfilling the cause of Christ...together.

We could look at many more scriptures but now to consider a crucial question. What does a local church look like that is about the business of neighbourhood transformation?

Key Indicators

There are a number of words that have come to be important in our life together at Southside. In looking at some of the key indicators for Neighbourhood Transformation we need to discuss what it means to be Missional, Incarnational, and Intentional.

1. Missional

The word has become something of a buzzword of late, thrown around by anyone and everyone trying to keep up with the latest in church life. Many churches however are describing themselves as missional when they are recognizing the fact that for too long they have been sitting on the sidelines and now want to re-engage in evangelism.

This is great. We need every church to share the good news, but that alone may not make them a missional church. Being missional is not about putting on more programs or giving more money and even putting more time into trying to reach out to the neighbourhood. Being missional begins with a profound conviction that we are invited to join in the mission of God and that the church does not exist for itself but rather for the world around us that God so desperately loves.

Long have been discussions in the past about whether evangelism was about proclamation or social justice. Being a missional church is about these and more.

a. Proclamation

We must take every advantage to proclaim that Christ is the reason for the hope that is in us. We need to preach it. We need to not be embarrassed, but proclaim it in the streets when we have a chance. We need to teach our people how to share their own stories and not just through a set of “laws” (a modern approach becoming less effective in a postmodern culture) but through the ability to tell how their story fits into the story of the people of God in that place which ultimately fits into the greater story of God - His history.

Twelve or more years ago when we started Southside Community Church, one of the events we held in the neighbourhood was known as ‘The Big Pig Gig’. It was essentially a block party with some pigs on spits for the neighbourhood to celebrate the end of summer. We wanted to have some top quality music but were afraid to play any of our church music so our band worked up a secular set (‘Taking Care Of Business’ and ‘The Cat’s In The Cradle’ never sounded so good!). The crowd of 750 appreciated it. With that came a token 5-minute evangelistic talk that the crowd tolerated.

Twelve years later with an audience of over 3500, we did things a little differently. Radically limiting the secular tunes, with pride we played some of the upbeat music that people would hear on any Sunday morning. And the people loved it. In fact in the last number of years we have had people from the neighbourhood dancing in the streets to music that is praising God. What a blast! And we have moved from the token 5-minute evangelism talk, to speaking of the Lord throughout. People tell their stories, the emcee of faith frequently and we are not afraid to proclaim that Christ is King. Not everyone moves in to listen, but we have an audience around the stage whenever we

find ways to proclaim the Good News.

b. Social Aid and Justice

Being missional includes caring for the least, the lost and the lonely in the neighbourhood. Christ is our advocate: does it not follow that He would want us to be advocates for those who need an advocate?

This aspect is very difficult to live out. This is so partly because much of what is needed is assumed to be handled by our government social welfare system. But with recent policy changes budget cuts gaps in care will become a bigger issue in the future as problems become more costly and time consuming. Portraying the gospel through social justice issues is challenging but critical.

But we have made efforts and others have done even more. Food banks, shelters, Crisis Pregnancy Centres, Legal Aid, job finding, cultural aid for immigrants, crisis intervention, and other ministries have proven to help us to gain the favour of the people.

As our social system continues to face ‘downsizing’ and ‘re-structuring’, there will be increasing need and opportunity for the church to fill a void.

c. Whole Gospel

One difference between modernism and postmodernism is the longing for community. Where Boomers valued the rational, following generations long more highly simply to belong. They are looking for identity in community. This is one of the best opportunities the church has had in decades to live out the truth of the gospel. We have so emphasized the rational and been duped by culture into reading the gospel through individualistic lenses that we continue to proclaim a faith that promotes a private relationship with God even to the exclusion of the faith community. Yet when we look at scripture, the good news is about so much more than personal relationship with God. It is about God saving souls, calling a people and redeeming all things.

Recent generations have emphasized the nuclear family. Scripture encourages and teaches us to develop our family life, but I am concerned we have done so at the cost of neglecting our spiritual family. What do we say to singles or single parents or the elderly or the disillusioned youth? How do we treat them? Do we include them in our “family?” This is an important aspect of the good news of Jesus to a lonely world. It is imperative that churches learn to foster a sense of more than just the ‘Dad, Mom, two kids and a dog’ mentality of the nuclear family.

There is more. I use to be annoyed at the blue boxes that we used for recycling. Every week it seemed I had loaded it incorrectly and the truck would pass my house without stopping. I was annoyed to the point of not bothering anymore. I was reminded of scripture passages pointing to the good news of God redeeming all things. We as believers are to lead the way in preserving creation. Isn’t that the mandate of Genesis 1? The whole Gospel engages the whole world.

d. Mission of God

Being missional means we understand we do not exist solely for those inside the church but for those outside. From the beginning of time, God has been on a mission to

draw a people to Himself. He will be their God and we His people. He has given us the task of joining Him in this mission. The church exists to be a demonstration to the world of what the love of God is all about. We are His body. We are called to carry on the work that Christ began. We are commissioned to do even greater things than Christ did. All because we have joined in the mission of God.

e. Reign of God

When a church truly becomes missional, the by-product is simple. God does not promise that he will help you to grow a big church. God does not promise that all the circumstances in your church will be to your liking. Nor does He promise that life will be easy. But one thing is sure. His presence will be in that place.

Now twelve years after starting Southside, we still experience the presence of God. We certainly do not get everything right. In fact I cringe at some of the mistakes we have made over the years. But God's favour rests upon us and there is evidence of His presence in our efforts.

2. Incarnational

If Christ pitched His tent among us, we too must pitch our tents among the people.

a. Boundaries

Somewhere along the way, things got turned upside down. Who or what is to blame may be mute but somewhere along the way believers in North America moved from being missionaries to consumers. We went from seeing ourselves as a people called to fulfill the purposes of God to individuals who go to church to meet our personal needs.

One of the ways that we become incarnational is to literally draw geographic boundaries around our mission fields. If you and I were working overseas, we would be quicker to say that we were working in such and such a territory or region. Mission organizations send missionaries to a specific place to plant churches, meet needs and see the kingdom move forward in that place. Why not see right where we live in the same way?

Each of the existing four congregations of Southside has a distinct boundary around it. This does not mean that those living outside of these boundaries are discouraged from being good neighbours, but it rather means that the primary influence of the congregation is towards the people in the particular geographic location.

In order to do a good job of reaching a specific neighbourhood, we look at boundaries through a number of lenses. If the area is a more densely populated area, we tend to make it smaller. If there are major roads in the area we use those, as they are already recognized geographic boundaries. We might look at where our people live and adjust the boundaries to accommodate a cluster of people. As we look at multiplying our congregations, it becomes easy to do as we see where God is bringing new people from and start a new congregation there.

b. A New Way of Living

If a church is going to reach a neighbourhood with the gospel of Christ, there needs to be a whole new (actually old) way of living. We need to see a move back to some of the

things that the early church did (and others throughout history). We need to see our people once again become missionaries to the place they live and not just consumers of religious goods. There are a few things we can do to see this begin to happen:

Move into the neighbourhood – encourage your people to buy homes or rent apartments within the boundaries of the mission field to which you have been called.

We have had some wonderful people at Southside who sacrificially have sold their homes and moved into our neighbourhoods. One family actually did this twice, moving from place to place to help us launch new congregations.

Shopping – encourage people to use banks, stores and services right in the neighbourhood where you are. It may not be as cheap as Wal-Mart, but the relationships that you can establish are worth the extra dollar.

One of our families used a bank in the neighbourhood. Through developing a relationship with a teller, they saw her commit her life to the Lord and then invite her parents to be a part of the church as well. They too decided to follow Jesus and have become an active part of our family.

Playing – play on the teams in the neighbourhood. Walk the streets, take the kids to the parks in that place and learn what it means to be a good neighbour.

One of the guys in our church loved football. He came to his accountability group with the problem that the team he had joined had their games at the same time as our service. What should he do? Without question he was commissioned to take “church” to the football field for the next ten weeks and be assured that our prayers were with him. For him, this was a completely missional issue. This was not about what was more important – church or football – it was about how he was becoming missional in his life.

Hospitality – create space and time in the schedule of the church to encourage the people of the church to invite their neighbours over for dinner.

Work – not everyone can work in the neighbourhood, but there is a mindset that we need to see change. So often we encourage our kids to decide “what they want to be when they grow up.” That is the wrong question. As believers we already know what we are to be when we grow up. We are to be missionaries. One cannot be a Christian without being a missionary. The question rather is “In what way will God use you to further His kingdom?” We must see our jobs as just that. And see all of life as our vocation. As I once heard at Willow Creek, “We are not accountants, or librarians, or teachers, or painters. We are missionaries cleverly disguised as each of the above.”

c. Mission Group Focus

Not only do individuals need to learn a new way of living, but so do we as the people of God. There has been an emphasis on small groups over the past few generations. One of the greatest “discoveries” we have made is to orient our small groups around mission. When a group existed to meet one another’s needs, we found that most often it failed to do this because of other things we wanted to foster in the life of our groups. However, when we began to release groups to be shaped geographically and missionally, we

discovered that the groups began to flourish and they even began to care for one another. Not only does each person need to learn to be a good neighbour, but each group (formed geographically) is learning to live out mission in the neighbourhood together.

3. Intentional

One of the components of church life that is sometimes missing is the ideal of living intentionally. I have often heard the comment that if businesses operated like many churches, they would be quickly out of business. I am not advocating that the church function solely as a business might, but if Bill Hybels is anywhere near correct when he says that the local church is the hope of the world, then how can we be so cavalier at times about how we function?

Our life at Southside is divided into five areas where we live intentionally for the purpose of being missional.

a. Passionate Spirituality

Although I do not believe the church exists only to worship in the narrow sense of the word, we must see worship as an intentional tool in reaching a neighbourhood.

Prayer – churches that ‘prayer walk’ their neighbourhoods on a regular basis see results as they work to transform their neighbourhoods. Intercessor groups need to be established not just for the sake of those inside the church, but even more for those who live close by. Churches need to scour the newspapers and pray for those issues in the community that need attention. Notes need to be sent to people who are going through a difficult time so that the people of God might pray. Door to door prayer ministry has proven effective in many churches.

My daughter Kristie will never forget a time when we were prayer walking and delivering flyers. The flyer she at a home in one of our congregations led to a woman coming to know Christ

Worship – we sometimes forget that worship can be used as an offensive tool in the spiritual realms as we seek to transform neighbourhoods. Who can forget the story of Jericho? Or what about the time when Israel was in battle (2 Chronicles 20) and through the praises – Eugene Peterson calls them a ‘choir’ – the enemy was routed. Worship needs to be seen not just as something we do for God or ourselves, but also as a huge weapon in the spiritual battle.

I mentioned earlier that during some of our events such as ‘The Big Pig Gig’ (now entitled ‘A Taste of Edmonds!’) we take our worship to the streets. Worship is not for just inside a building, but it is what the people of God do wherever they are. Learning to sing on the streets during these events has had great results in our neighbourhoods.

Whole-hearted – When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, He responded by beginning with the fact that we must love God with all of our hearts. My experience is that the more we learn to love Christ, and to serve Him whole-heartedly, the more we learn to love those He loves.

b. Incarnational Living

We have already spoken of loving our neighbourhood. But as we speak about the

value of Incarnational Living (not quite the same as evangelism) let us look at other practical ways this plays out.

Impact List

Although ministry gifts vary, we are all called to be witnesses.

I remember a couple early in the life of our church that everyone loved. This was a dear couple who added a tremendous amount to our life together in those early days. I was sitting with them at one point discussing what it meant to live incarnationally. They were excited about how our church reached out, but said in no uncertain terms that God had gifted them to disciple believers and therefore would not be involved in reaching their neighbours. That was not their gift. It wasn't long after I reiterated our belief that all who are believers are to be witnesses that they left the church.

At Southside, each person who has entered into a Mission Group is expected to be developing a relationship with someone who does not know Christ. Each week as the groups meet, people will share stories of how God has worked in that friendship and the group will pray for that person. Throughout the week the group may be praying for others in their group and the relationship that they have cultivated. Some switch "Impact" people, recognizing that God has brought someone else into their life to be a witness to.

It is crucial that we not set out to make projects out of people. But it is equally important to be intentional in our relationships or we may go years without sharing our faith.

Mission Group Focus

As well as each member of the group praying for one another's unbelieving friends, each group also sets out to see the neighbourhood as a mission. The group is released at the beginning of the year to develop a ministry to the neighbourhood, which is funded by the larger church. Through this intentional endeavour, we have seen the love of Christ shared in neighbourhoods in ways people have not experienced before.

One group has adopted an apartment complex. This complex is made up of working class people and many unemployed. Money is not found in abundance in this place. The group has done many "acts of kindness" for the people there. They have built a shed for the tenants to store tools. They have renovated and repainted the playground. They have held banquets in the courtyard for the people who live there - free of charge. The results have been outstanding as the people of the complex have seen the love of Christ exhibited through these twelve people. Many have come to church and have made decisions to follow Christ. Members of the group have even taken people into their homes when people in the complex have needed help during domestic difficulties or when struggling with addictions.

Other groups of the church have been involved in Senior's ministry, skate board ministry, Me and Mom's, feeding the hungry, English as a Second Language classes and more.

Congregational Events

Each of our congregations is specifically responsible for their “mission field.” Members reach their friends, groups reach into the neighbourhood and each congregation comes together at times to host events that foster ‘favour’ in that place. Congregations are made up of Mission Groups serving the neighbourhood. Some such events have included sports camps, day camps, block parties, fireworks, movie nights (make sure to pick the movie CAREFULLY) and English as a Second Language classes in multicultural neighbourhoods.

God has greatly blessed us as we have put time and energy into reaching and transforming our neighbourhoods. Here are a couple stories:

The Big Pig Gig started as an end of summer block party that God “turbo-charged” into a huge event. The first year, we were petrified no one would come. We had gone to all kinds of work preparing for this big event and invested a lot of money as well.

To get the word out, we had signed a contract with the Canada Post to deliver flyers to 4500 neighbouring homes several days before the event. We got the flyers to them on time but then received a phone call indicating they would now be delivering them the day after the event! You can see the dilemma that this might create (although I was convinced that the person who informed us did not see it as a problem). What were we going to do?

I dialed the local newspaper. They loved the story and sent a crew to our church to meet with me and take some pictures. Sure enough there I was two days later (and two days before the event) on the front page of the paper with the headline “Pig-out, To Help Church.” The circulation of the paper was 45,000 homes. 750 neighbourhood people showed up.

As the Big Pig Gig grew the mayor closed off the street for us and has often come to the event. Local politicians have participated as have other community organizations. As our neighbourhood changed with more Muslims arriving we changed the name to “A Taste of Edmonds!” and stopped serving pork. Local ethnic restaurants serve food from all over the world and we celebrate with the community what is happening there. We sing and dance to Jesus on the streets in front of and with our neighbours.

Another way in which we have seen our congregations have an impact is through movie nights. We have obtained the appropriate licenses and show recently released DVDs to families who may not be able to afford attending a theatre together. We have packed the church out with multiple showings.

As I was recently discipling with a new believer, I asked the question of how they first had heard about our church. The response thrilled me. He had brought his kids to the church for movie nights on many occasions and knew that if he ever attended a church, this would be the one. He loved how we gave back to the community.

c. Intentional Community

Worship and community events are only the beginning of how the local church witnesses to the neighbourhood. Jesus said that our neighbours would know we are His

disciples by the love we have for one another.

New Family

As mentioned above, 1 Peter 2:9 speaks volumes of the fact that when we become followers of Christ we enter into a new family. Being a part of this new family has great impact on our neighbours who do not yet know Christ.

I do not want to debate exactly when someone becomes a follower of Christ and is “saved” but suggest it to be more as a process than an event. Yet too often we speak and act relating to neighbours with “inside/outside” mentality.

One of the greatest ways we have seen people take steps toward believing in a God who loves them is to help them belong. We include people in mission, even though they may not yet follow Christ. There are those who long to have a higher purpose and can't wait to have a part to play in making the world a better place. I have had friends who are not yet Christians playing Jesus in a street drama on an overseas mission trip.

We invite people to participate. There are times they are invited into our Mission Group and made to feel they belong. When they see the sense of family and the love that we have for each other, the journey to deciding to follow Christ seems to be made that much more easily.

One man from China had been attending our church for over 2 years. At one point, a newcomer to the church mistook him for a pastor. The irony of the situation was that he had not yet made a decision to follow Christ. But he was so involved that people thought he was staff. What a joy it was to hug him only two weeks ago as he told me he had become a brother to me that morning during the service.

Known as Disciples

Besides helping people to feel they belong at one level, they also need to see a consistency in our behaviour. We as believers need to be wholly committed to obedience so that we will begin to reverse the opinion that we are hypocrites. That will never fully go away, but when the neighbourhood sees consistency from fully devoted disciples, the favour increases.

d. Transformational Discipleship

We are also called to love God with all of our minds. This too helps transform our neighbourhoods.

Experts in the Neighbourhood

Is it possible for the church to be known as the experts on the neighbourhood? What would it be like if, when someone needed to know what was happening in a place, they came to the church to get the facts?

This does happen in places and the results are tremendous. At Southside we have had government officials coming to the church to find out what is happening in the neighbourhood. It has opened so many doors for us.

Training Programs

It is also crucial that we train the people of the church to relate to their neighbours. Canada is such a tremendously diverse country in terms of ethnicity. Religious pluralism is the order of the day and we need to be training our people to be educated to talk with people about their faith. We need to learn to enter into dialogue; not to be argumentative but to be listeners to others and able to respond.

e. Radical Stewardship

Finally, it is important that we model a way of life that is attractive to the neighbourhood. We need to be radical stewards of our time, talent and treasure.

Time

In a world where the pace of life continues to increase exponentially, we need to learn to live with a rhythm in life that brings a deep inner sense of peace. Instead of getting sucked into the pace of life that culture thrusts upon us, we must live in a way that others will be drawn to the rhythm that we show.

The Greek language did not just have one word for “time.” One of the Greek words “aeon,” reflects an emphasis on a lifetime and leaving a legacy. The issue here was not on how much can we get done in the least amount of time, but rather what legacy are we leaving behind and what influence are we having now.

Talent

There is nothing like being released to do the very things that God designed you to do. Who among us does not get excited to know that God designed us perfectly to fulfill the tasks that He set aside for us to do in the furthering of His kingdom? When you and I are doing these things, using the gifts that He gave us to fulfill these tasks, there is a joy and energy around us that is contagious.

In the early days of Southside, we developed relationship with a Japanese man who was unfortunately unemployed at the time. He also had not decided to follow Jesus at this point. He came to me one day and was so sad that he could not contribute financially to what was happening. Instead he asked if he could do some work on the gardening around the building.

For three weeks he used his skill and patience and sat on the grass, pulling out the moss with his hands. I confess that I wondered why he used that approach. Why not just buy a big bag of moss killer and kill it.

A month later you should have seen the lawn. I have never seen a lawn like it. All from this Japanese man who didn't know Christ using his gifts and expertise to help the church because he couldn't give money. He had once been a gardener for the hotel in Lake Louise where they didn't use herbicides.

The story gets better. A woman came to our church for the first time soon after. Following the service she thanked me for the service. We chatted and then I asked her why she had come that morning. “I was walking by and I noticed your lawn. I figured that if you cared for your grass that much, then it was likely that you would care for me as well.”

Evangelism through lawn maintenance.

Treasures

Those who exercise the gift of giving know the joy of seeing God's money released for the furthering of the Kingdom. How is it that on average evangelical charitable giving is only .5% higher than that of the public? What is it about tithing that we have not understood? If only we would give more generously, we would see God heal our land. The amount of resources we could use to bring change would be phenomenal if only we tithed.

But there is more that can happen in the area of finances to see neighbourhood transformation. The early church led the way. There were none among them that were needy.

Recently a family in the church was heavily in debt. Because of the nature of community that we believed in, this family came to their "spiritual family" and asked for help. One member of the church took over their finances in a radical move. Another family invited them to live in a part of their house for a reduced rate. Within one year, this family who had been so severely in debt and chased by creditors, is now free from debt... and free to give generously. This kind of living transforms neighbourhoods.

4. Municipal Churches/ City Churches

We need to briefly mention another key component, more fully developed in another chapter, to seeing neighbourhoods transformed.

With deep conviction and out of experience, local churches need to participate in local ministerials. I know the complaints. Many of these in the past have been boring or little more than debate sessions. But God is at work and multi-denominational prayer communities are gaining momentum.

One of our congregations is in an area where fifty churches are involved in praying together, working together, serving one another and doing whatever it takes to see the Kingdom of God move forward. These churches have covenanted together so that there is not competition between churches, but rather, a healthy cooperation. Covenants are entered into agreeing that no church will allow people to join their church from another church without release from the previous church. Far too often, believers are shuffling from one church to another whenever they become disgruntled about something. This attitude destroys what God wants to do in transforming neighbourhoods.

These churches are also working together in outreach activities. Even today in one of our congregations, there was evidence of this. Where we used to hold a "Party in the Park" event on our church property, this year the event became interdenominational, multiplying results, as the event was held in the park.

None of these events on their own guarantee that things will change in a neighbourhood overnight, but faithfulness in these areas over time will not go unnoticed by those in the neighbourhood. God is faithful and this is His mission. All we are doing is joining Him in what He already is doing.

Key Results

The chapter would not be complete without looking at some results that may come as outcomes of the local church being faithful in these areas. Southside is nowhere near a perfect church, but we have seen God at work in so many ways.

1. Schools

If there is one area the church is not guaranteed a positive reception, it may be with the local school. Schools in Canada do not tend to be sympathetic to the church.

In several of our congregations, we have moved through this barrier. Through involvement in parent's groups, through moms praying for the school, by making the church facility available to school groups and through developing relationships with staff at the school, our congregations have come to enjoy the favour of the school. Local schools will hand out flyers in the school for upcoming church events. They will invite our staff in to teach classes. They will call upon pastoral staff when there are needy families in the neighbourhood. They will invite participation from the church when making some decisions that involve their students. This kind of relationship in our culture is uncommon so we stand amazed. From the outside, one would immediately think that the principal of the school must be a believer. But this is not the case. Instead, we continue to serve the school and invite the principal to special events.

2. Crime

In one of the neighbourhoods we serve, we have seen a reduction in elements of crime.

The municipality in which one of our congregations ministers was known as the car-theft capital of the country. Pastors from many churches in the area began to prayer walk the area praying against this evidence of criminal activity.

Within a month, the police were informing us that the auto theft rate had decreased by 30%.

This is only one story among many. Others have come in from different neighbourhoods about how when God's people become missional in that place, one of the evidences that is seen is the decrease of crime.

3. Partnerships

Another result is a fresh partnering between the church and community organizations. For instance, over the past twelve summers, we have run sports camps in the neighbourhood. These camps are run in conjunction with the Parks and Recreation department of the city. This partnership enables us to provide camps at an incredibly low rate so many more kids can come. After the camp is over, the whole family is invited to attend a service where we give out awards and share in a BBQ celebration.

The ability to partner with other organizations has led to seeing professional athletes come to various outreaches in our neighbourhood. It has led to the Mayor's council meeting in one of our buildings. It has led to the city giving us all kinds of

help to do community events in the neighbourhood.

4. Community Spirit

Not only does the church enjoy the favour of many of the people, but it seems that when the local church is helping transform the neighbourhood, residents generally have a better disposition towards what is happening. There seems to be a better sense of community spirit. People get involved. Other community organizations are motivated to do more for one another and the neighbourhood. Other partnerships begin to develop. In a sense, it is like a snowball rolling down the hill and gathering speed.

5. Poverty

The issue of poverty is complex and is not an issue one church alone will solve. But all can play a part.

One of our congregations has hosted a food bank to help deal with the issue. In each of our congregations members have been involved in taking food to the poor as we have become aware of need. We have housed those who need a place to sleep. We have worked to help people find jobs – with great success in some cases. We have bent over backwards to help the least, the last and the lonely.

Dealing with the issue of poverty is not a single church issue. It is an issue involving changes to government structures, spending, education and more. Some churches are making inroads into these areas but since government alone cannot solve the complex and interrelated problems, we will need to take on more.

6. Intercultural

One of the great truths of the gospel we can so easily miss is the fact that when we become followers of Christ, He in fact creates a whole new society of His people. This new society knows no cultural barriers, but recognizes and celebrates cultural distinctives. What does this mean? What does this look like?

- a. It means that we need to be culturally relevant in the outreach that we do in our neighbourhoods. People need to hear the gospel in their language. They need to see the gospel presented in a way they can understand.
- b. It means that as people come to know Christ, cultural and ethnic barriers come down and one new people are established.
- c. It means that as the congregation grows into becoming an intercultural community, we do not impose our western mentality and customs on others, but we celebrate diversity in the midst of unity. Why not have some of the service in different styles and different languages?
- d. It means that one of the greatest tools for evangelism we have as the people of God is the reflection of a new people into the community around us, when the community around is fighting over differences. Racism is rampant. People are secluded into ethnicities. But when we the people of God demonstrate the power of Christ to help us be one, this has a tremendous impact in the neighbourhood.

7. Family Life

We have seen God do incredible things in family life as well. Not just inside the church but also outside.

There are numerous examples where people have had struggling marriages and the church has intervened with marriages saved as a result. At times we have separated husband and wife for a period so that there would be opportunity for them to get help individually as well as together. We have entered homes in the neighbourhood and removed derelict husbands from the home, only to see them come to Christ months later, and together renew their vows.

We have couples come from the neighbourhood to take marriage and family courses. These couples would not have come to other events, but sensed a need to develop these areas of their lives. We have seen single mom's experience the fact that in Christian community, although their kids may not have their biological father around, they are surrounded by men who 'pick up' many aspects of this role. Singles are included in family holidays. Others are invited to regular meals with families in the church. All this does not weaken the nuclear family, but rather strengthens it.

One woman in our church, when pushed to give an answer to someone who doubted our balance of ministry and nuclear family, responded that she was so glad that the emphasis in our church was right where it was. She had seen her kids benefit more from community and ministry than they would if she focused exclusively on her family.

8. Blue Boxes

As mentioned earlier, Christians need to lead the way in being environmentally aware.

Most of our congregations have had "community clean-up days." We have invited neighbours to help as we have worked hard in the neighbourhood to pick up trash and to work towards more effective recycling. Many others have worked on issues such as graffiti.

If we are truly to be in charge of creation, then let us take that mandate seriously.

The list of expected outcomes could go on for a long time. Many churches are seeing God's reign in their place as a result of their faithfulness in serving the community.

I used to look at the old parish model of the Anglican Church with a sense of bewilderment. I couldn't understand why there needed to be such firmly bounded structure. While I am not advocating needless structure, I do believe that if local churches began once again to see their neighbourhoods as distinct mission fields to which God has called them, we would see an outpouring of the spirit of God like we haven't seen in some time. If churches would understand and live out the truth that we exist not to put on great services for believers, but to live out our faith in the world, to fulfill the mission of God, we would certainly see the favour of the people of our neighbourhoods resting upon the church once again.

Each church needs to take seriously the call to be missional, to live incarnationally and to be as intentional as they can be. Each church needs to be strategic in the way they live out their faith so that, in all areas of life together, they see not only the benefits for followers of Christ, but even more so how God will use each of these activities to draw others to Himself.

The 'seeker' church movement emphasizes entry-level services for unbelievers. Let's go a step further. Let's see our spirituality, our prayer, our worship, our care for one another, our giving, our energy, our time, the development of our minds and so much more, as positive responses and offerings to a God who is on a mission. When we do this, I believe that we will see community transformation beyond our wildest dreams.

Questions for Reflection and Action:

1. Which of the biblical passages used in this chapter impacted you the most? Why? What change will it make in the way you carry out ministry?
2. What ideas for ministry in reaching a neighbourhood caught your attention? What would it take for you to implement an idea like this in your faith community?
3. What would your church need to do to "enjoy the favour of all the people" in your neighbourhood?
4. What focus do your small groups have? How much mission do your groups do? What would you need to do to change that?
5. According to the chapter, what is the difference between Evangelism and "Incarnational Living?"

About the Author:

Cam Roxburgh is Team Leader at Southside Community Church (www.southside.ca), a multi-congregational church soon to be living out the Gospel in six neighbourhoods around Vancouver. Southside was started in 1992 by Cam and his wife Shelley with a group of friends who wanted to make a difference in their community. Cam and Shelley have four kids ranging in age from 9 to 14. Cam also serves with Church Planting Canada and Hope Vancouver.

