

Session 3 CONTEXT:

Location, Location, Location!

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Many congregations are trapped in a repetitious dead end road that the average community person finds irrelevant, boring, and uninspiring. What is intended to be an experience of God, an encounter with the Divine, and a transformational movement of Christ is instead some variation of the worst stereotypes. This isn't a simplistic appeal to be contemporary rather than traditional since either approach can fall into an annual or multi-year cycle of repetition. Too often either gathering seems to be an exercise of dry, dull history and tradition with little relevance to real life or such a disconnect that anyone on the church fringe or a church outsider is quickly lost. Why do we keep doing the same thing/s? Why can't we reach new and different people? These losses may in fact teach if we listen. Perhaps there is a tension between what is preached or taught versus what is lived and practiced in every day in the community. It is essential to develop relationships beyond the church and listen closely to people from your larger context, your community, to know how you are doing as a Lazarus Church.

How does a church push beyond the status quo into the full *missio Dei* (review <http://www.umcmmission.org/Learn-About-Us/About-Global-Ministries/Theology-of-Mission> if necessary)?

A major step for a congregation is the theological, and baptismal practice, of **dying to ourselves** and rising to newness of life in Christ. We must be **alive to this moment** in the kingdom of God. We must listen well to our neighbors in the community. We must rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us, correct us, and lead us through the challenges of the day. This is a necessity, for individuals and the corporate body of faith, to live a vibrant, repentant, righteous faith that makes a real difference in our lives and in the lives of others in our community. This is more than an exercise in doctrine or theology, but a practical necessity for both church and community.

Unfortunately too many of our congregations favor *style over substance*, discussions and opinions over transformed lives, and prefer re-creating programs. Just give us the right preacher, or the right music, or the right program. As individuals, and collectively as a church, we can easily fall into these habits. We prefer a quick, easy answer instead of our personal transformation and growth in holiness and sanctification. After all, Jesus may disrupt our expectations, our family, our business, our social life, and our world. We keep waiting on someone else, and fail to see our key leadership role that will change everything. Warning: There will be some personalities- this could be laity, staff, or clergy- who desire to keep us and the congregation as it is. Such limiting folk may be acting intentionally or unintentionally in maintaining status quo and a dry religion which lacks power and effect. Read Wesley, Asbury, or dig into the New Testament for more on this.

Too many churches are going through the motions yet aren't living completely in our calling to be the *Body of Christ*. We don't follow Jesus as closely as we should, therefore we find it easiest to

replicate practices and ritual while lacking sanctifying experiences of God. This can lead to all manner of idolatry. Many congregations seem to have been held hostage by our buildings and calendars and histories and routines, so that we've become a **subgroup of the community** with little or no relationship/s beyond our group. We "do our thing" which now seem to be peculiar practices which we in a particular church may respond to, yet which visitors when they occasionally find us, just don't "get" or appreciate enough to claim us as their people. We desire to be "more" yet there seems to be some disconnect, unspoken distance, which cannot be overcome despite our best efforts.

How does a congregation overcome this disconnect and create & maintain a strong relationship between church and community? How do I hear God sending me? How is God sending us?

Here's another image which might be useful. Recently I saw a state truck with some sort of tank that I couldn't quite make out. It was an unusual sight that I couldn't figure out on the rather ordinary, typical government vehicle. As I got closer I realized the truck was carrying baby fish, fingerlings, that had been raised in a hatchery and would be placed in streams and reservoirs as part of the restocking program. Those lakes, ponds, and streams need a large influx of new fish and need a lot of helpers to make that possible. Those stable system, or closed system, bodies of water rely on an intentional, managed restocking program. It made me wonder what the "*restocking program*" is in most churches.

There is a huge "*x*" factor regarding the context of a congregation in a community which is often overlooked as it can be complex and resists simplistic "steps to success" which many church programs tout. The greatest preacher or choir won't overcome a *disconnect* between congregation and community. It's certainly more than mission "projects." What would it look like for your congregation to be at the *crossroads* of *missio Dei* in your community? What would it look like to fan the flames of the kingdom of God movement in your community? In your church? How would you reorient the church strategy and priorities each week to be a Lazarus Church?

Community Reality: One of my favorite classes in seminary was called "**Church and Community.**" It was quite the experience to ride a Friday night shift with law enforcement. Even better we had to spend 36 hours "on the street" as a homeless person, with just enough change on us to catch the bus into town, so we'd *learn the city* from another perspective. It's a "game changer" when you must rely on others in their own predicament, must find food to eat and a bed to rest, and experience "your town" without any resources or friends. How do you know and experience the complexity of your community? If you really want to know your community you should spend a day with a teacher, or ride a shift with a police officer, or spend the day at social services. You may quickly learn some things you don't want to know or have avoided.

How might you get beyond your normal routine and paths and **explore ALL** of your community? What is the "song" of your community (yes, name it!)? Can your practical theology bridge church and community? What are the implications for ministry if you have one foot firmly in the church and one foot firmly in the community?

Knowing the people group/s. International mission teaches us that when you go to experience church in a distant land you 1) *don't understand much* about the culture and place, 2) need to *listen and learn* and do best to have locals as your *guide*, 3) that you have experience but need to be *careful* to not place too much of your background on that context. Said another way, there is a danger in my placing my personal experience, cultures, and opinions as the highest value of church and expectation of God's

kingdom work everywhere. I do best to go as a brother disciple and be quick to learn and seek to follow Christ in that context. Along the way I will learn more about myself, the kingdom of God, and the cultural baggage of church and my discipleship.

We learned early on that you can't run on generalities, but do best to focus on knowing and valuing people in their context. So, if in an African country a visiting team will want to learn as much as possible about the particular *people group* (we once thought of this as tribe but that isn't quite strong enough and is somewhat pejorative), language, customs, and soak up as much as possible. Beyond that we will want to know individuals, enjoy growing relationships, and eat as much food and hear as much music as possible. Learning, and perhaps even loving, what the culture offers is a key to better appreciating some depth of engagement in the context. Multiple friendships, long term partnering, and consistent stance of learning/discipling enhance and deepen knowing and loving a people group.

I find many churches don't know what tribe/tribes they represent, nor what tribes are in the local community. Again, note this is simplistic language for an engaging, complex subject. The intent isn't to make everyone the same, but to realize and appreciate the diversity, the variety, the incredible complexity of God's creation, and countries and cultures, and ethnicities and religions. The interest isn't to isolate, but instead to engage. The hope isn't to elevate one culture or subculture, but to explore the Kingdom of God in all the cultural variety. And to become individuals and church that are comfortable in our community just as Jesus was comfortable visiting, and eating with, and knowing so many different types of people. If churches truly know the variety of people and groups in our communities we will also better know who God calls is calling us to reach.

Follow Jesus: Think about the **ministry of Jesus** and the range of people who responded to *missio Dei*. Reflect on the variety of people who responded to Peter, Paul, and the early church- varied religions, ethnic groups, socio-economic classes, culture and subcultures, genders, slave and free, etc.

Study **Luke 10:25-37** or Beatitudes and Sermon on the Mount

Oft repeated and shared, but how do you realistically live this out? Who are the **Samaritans** in your community? How do you, or your church, typically justify yourself? At your very best, how might you show mercy to the Samaritans in your community? Please push beyond the politics of the day which reflect a kingdom, or subset of a kingdom, and consider the Kingdom of God approach we should follow. Note that this is particularly challenging in an election year, yet we are called to be obedient to the way of Jesus. What danger is there, for you or your church, if you respond to the Samaritan in your community? What ministry opportunities do you see as you compare who you are, and what God has entrusted to you, with the needs of the Samaritans in your community? How does Jesus show mercy? How might we multiply that Jesus approach in our individual and communal life? Are you sick or dying because of your failure to be a risk taking church of mercy, forgiveness, and healing as shown in this faith story? What next?

A Lazarus Church is *right in the middle of the life of a community*. Such a church is a community center, a healing place, a sanctuary for all, a place of grace in word and deed, and certainly a hospital and home for the local Samaritan. Such a transformational faith practice, of the individuals of a congregation and the church as a whole, has profound implications for the local church and its community. The community will be the best gauge of this. What do the Samaritans say about your church?

Missio Dei Practice: How does your church know, interact with, and heal the local Samaritan? What if your church looked like the school nearest to your congregation? Or perhaps the major store or mall in your region. What would that look like? What would your church need to do for that to become a reality? Where do you follow Jesus in the streets and homes of your community?

Video option: 8 minute video on partnering, asset based development, holistic mission & ministry, and learning globally to act locally

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eHaPJ_69jHo&index=72&list=PLLndq_wxshzEFGVwtdCXt3jJu8ePxRIOh