

GASPAR F. COLÓN
INCARNATIONAL COMMUNITY-
BASED MINISTRY: A LEADERSHIP
MODEL FOR COMMUNITY
TRANSFORMATION

Incarnational Ministry

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to Him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed Him. (Matt. 4:23–25, NIV)

As we look at the life and ministry of Jesus, and get caught up in His intensity and focus on bringing the influence of the kingdom of heaven to whomever He met, we must ask ourselves to what extent the Christian church reflects the transformational traits palpable in the ministry of Jesus. Is the church, as the body of Christ, content to live on the sidelines as passive victims of the entropy of humanism and its resulting post-Christianity? Does the church even perceive itself as an incarnational entity through which Christ showers His blessings to a world filled with self-centeredness, suffering, and pain? Does the church strive to earn social capital and trust by reflecting the ministry of Jesus: tg.lecting post-22.5 (to(hem.lecting) -22.o03oecting) n338-22.o03oectinhAs reflhower -

the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18, 19, NIV). Then Jesus added, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (v. 21). In contrast to this messianic passage, God calls His people away from self-centered religion in Isaiah 58. The fast that God chooses must not focus His people on their own hunger, but rather on the needs of others. The result? "Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings" (Is. 58:12, NIV).

Foundational to Christian teaching and preaching is the message that (1) God loves us (Jn. 3:16); (2) all have sinned and miss the mark of God's righteousness (Rom. 3:23); (3) the wage of sin is death (Rom. 6:23); (4) the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus, who paid the penalty of sin on our behalf (Rom. 6:23; Col. 2:13, 14); (5) we are saved by God's grace, through faith in Jesus (Eph. 2:4–10); and (6) we are judged by how that faith works in mirroring the ministry of Jesus in the world around us (Matt. 25:31–46). If point number six is vague, missed, or ignored, we wind up with what Richard Stearns (2010) calls "the hole in our gospel":

The gospel Jesus described in Luke 4 is indeed something solid. If there is a hole in our gospel, in our understanding of the nature of God's call upon us, His followers, it is not because Scripture is unclear about these issues. Rather, it is because we have chosen . . . to pay little attention to God's unmistakable message to bring the whole gospel to the whole world. (p. 24)

Linthicum's Three Churches

Urban ministry expert Robert Linthicum (1991) proposes that there are three kinds of churches. Which church is yours?

The Church in the City (Community)

This refers only to location, because the church members are not from the community. The church has little or no involvement in the community; it is "in" but not "of" its community. If we were to consider the church as the "salt" in a banana bread recipe, this model would probably look like Figure 1.

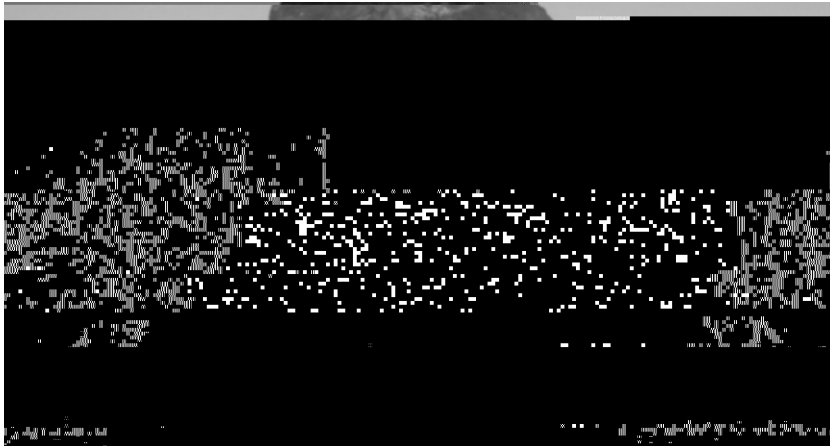


Figure 1. A large, dense crowd of people, likely at a church service or community gathering, with many individuals looking towards the camera.

The Church to the City (Community)

This is a church with a keen sense of responsibility to do something for the community. Its fatal flaw is in its perception that the church knows what is best for the community. The church decides unilaterally what the community needs and invites the community to participate. Eventually, church member burnout occurs because, regardless of how much the members work to promote the programs, the community does not trust the diagnosis the church has made. For example, suppose you go to a medical doctor, walk into the examination room, and the doctor glances at you. He pulls out a prescription pad, writes a prescription, signs it, hands it to you and sends you to the cashier. Would you trust him with your diagnosis?

The Church with the City (Community)

This church sees mission to the community as a partnership. It incarnates itself in that community, discovers from the community the burning issues, brings the ministry of the church out into the community, and nurtures personal relationships with individuals in the community. This third kind of church sees the value of connecting with the local leadership of the community surrounding the church. The unique needs of the community help mold the avenues through which this church will conduct its heaven-sent mission.

Christ's Method Alone

As we look at the person of Jesus through the eyes of the inspired writers of the New Testament, we see One who is the "radiance of God's

glory and the exact representation of His being" (Heb. 1:3, NIV). Peter testifies that "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and [that] he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him" (Acts 10:38, NIV). The apostle Paul identifies Jesus as the "head of the body, the church" (Col. 1:18, NIV), and reminds us that "God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27, NIV). This indwelling of Christ, through the mediation of the Holy Spirit, calls for importunate action: "Whoever claims to live in Him must live as Jesus did" (1 John 2:6, NIV).

This indwelling walk with Christ requires that the members of this body, the church, take the proclamation of the gospel to a new level, which follows the pattern of ministry and discipleship that is evident in the life and ministry of Jesus. Ellen G. White (1909) offers a meaningful description of how Jesus ministered:

Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, "Follow Me." (p. 143)

It almost feels constraining to even consider that, when we look at Christ's method, it would be a singular pattern. By nature leadership prefers a variety of options. Why would we limit ourselves to one method alone?

Yet good leadership also prefers specificity. True leadership is going to want to define the success. What does it constitute? What will it look like? How will we know that it is true success? Maybe the answer comes when we take this statement and place it in the form of a formula.

The "Christ's Method Alone" Formula

Dr. Caleb Rosado¹ has created such a formula, on which the following discussion is built (see Figure 2). When we look at Christ's ministry, we see Him mingling (socializing) with the crowds. This opened networks to those who needed Him most, even the unlovely—perhaps especially the unlovely. He was even criticized for welcoming sinners and eating with them (Luke 15:1, 2). This mingling was not self-serving in nature. He mingled with a purpose, desiring their good.

Christ's method also included sympathizing. Christ's sympathy

¹Ideas and diagrams in this article that are attributed to Caleb Rosado come either from lectures

sought to understand the circumstance, the joy, the pain, and the

willing it so. Confidence is something aided by the Holy Spirit when He has all the ingredients in place.

Finally, when this method had been lived out and trust established, Jesus “bade them, ‘Follow Me.’” This invitation goes beyond the testimony of baptism. It is a call to discipleship. It is a call to join the body of Christ in living and ministering as Jesus did. It is a call to discover spiritual gifts that new members can apply to Christ’s method.

A Paradigm Shift for Ministry

In an effort to give a visual description of the ministry of the church, many churches have produced a graph similar to Figure 3. It is an

Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries

When we consider the rapid expansion of Christianity in the first three centuries A.D., several factors relating to incarnational ministry come into focus. According to Rodney Stark's (2006) research, within 20 years after the crucifixion Christianity went from a faith based in rural Galilee to an urban movement in cities like Antioch, Corinth, and Athens. Population density in those cities ranged from 78.2 to 130

