

Missional Communities: Equipping Churches to Reach Their Local Context, by Robert Parker

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### **Introduction to Book Review**

Robert Parker's dissertation titled: *Missional Communities: Equipping Churches to Reach Their Local Context*, suggests that there is a steady decline of church participation in the Northeast section of the US. The reason for this decline is that churches have become narrow minded and restricted in their thinking. As a result, churches have dropped the ball on meeting the needs of the community. Parker seeks to remedy this problem by looking at ways to push churches from a state of exclusivity to creating ministries that centered around the needs of their community (Parker 2014:13).

The reading states that "There is a contingency of church leaders who argue that the term "missional" is a philosophy of ministry rather than a theological understanding of a sending God. But the church is the body of Christ, the presence of God in local communities, and it has the capacity to bring the full expression of God's mission to a broken world (Parker 2014:vii)." Part of the problem is leaders who carry this belief. The reading refutes this belief by providing examples of how God was missional in the bible, such as when Jesus trained and sent out the disciples to tell about God's grace and mercy.

Parker provides the reader with another example of why church attendance is declining. People often seek to solve the church attendance issue by starting a small group or church planting. They focus more on making great ministries than connecting the community with the ministries. The result is that you will end up starting another failed ministry at a different time or location. Parker speaks about two men (Jeremy and David) who wanted to plant a church in NJ but didn't know what to do. They researched and attended trainings but soon realized that none of the information was helpful because it didn't focus on the community's needs.

The author's intent when writing this dissertation was to show the reader that if you want to plant a church that will be successful in attendance, you must do your research on the location you want to serve. Don't create ministries that focus on your church. Create ministries that will cater to the spiritual, physical and emotional needs of the community. Go into the community and find out what their concerns are and build your church/ministry accordingly. Show the community that you are interested in what is going on with them.

Parker states that "Christianity in America has changed over the past three decades. Where once Christianity was the prominent, and fair to say, dominant faith, today, American's perspective on faith and Christianity has shifted (Parker 2014:2)." Parker uses statistics to support the fact that Americans are no longer making Christianity the foundation of their lives. Since this is the case, it is important to reach the community on the level in which they are and not where the church is. In a survey provided by the writer, "more than 1 in 3 adults (33%) in the United States are unchurched. This represents 125 million people, meaning the unchurched population in the States is equivalent to the tenth largest country in the world (Parker 2014)." He further states that "based on these perceptions, diagnosis of the church's sickness is: American Christians do not represent the Christ they claim to represent—namely, a forgiving and gracious savior (Parker 2014, p. 11)."

The author has clearly met his intended goal in his writing. The writer forces the reader to evaluate the way things are currently being done and pushes you to dig deeper if you are considering planting a church. Parker argues that missional communities should be vehicles of discipleship because they empower individuals in the community to make the gospel relevant in their neighborhoods (Parker 2014:82)." This argument is very powerful because community involvement is the key to effective discipleship.

### **Book Interaction**

Parker states that “Service is a means of evangelism. Service helps to gain the trust of individuals and communities. As people have their needs met, they become sensitive to the message of those assisting them with their needs (Parker 2014:71).” This statement is 100 percent accurate. The church must restructure the way they operate if they want to reach the community. They must become service focused but not inward service, but community focused service.

Jesus showed us this example many times in the bible. When he serviced the needs of the community, it caused the people to want to know more about Jesus and his message. The community is not going to listen to what you have to say if they are suffering from hunger or facing eviction. This is one reason people are leaving the church today. They feel that the church is not concerned about their needs. So, they become uninterested in what the church has to say.

The way that Parker presented this fact has helped me to really understand why many churches, even my own, are having such a difficult time with membership. A lot of churches believe that the remedy to this problem is to create a new ministry within the church. They think that if you create the ministry and hand out flyers in the neighborhood, people will come and join. This does not work at all. Especially when the community has never seen your church actively working to assist them with their concerns.

You must assess the community that you are trying to reach. Evaluate what their needs are and what gifts and talents do you have to offer this community. “As a missional community identifies both their spiritual gifting and unique talents, they are able to serve their specific local context. This presents the opportunity to proclaim the gospel by manifesting Christ within their

local community (Parker 2014:73)". This should be done before planning to plant a church or start a new ministry in the community.

Parker also talks about "Person of Peace and Gate Keepers." He quotes David Watson, who defines the person of peace as, "the one God has prepared to receive the Gospel for the first time into a community (Parker 2014:74)." These persons of peace once introduced to the gospel, provides a way for the gospel to be spread throughout their community. Parker calls it the Gate Keeper principle, and he uses Cornelius and Lydia as examples of gate keepers because they made it possible for their community to learn about the gospel (Parker 2014:76).

This should be the way that the church community views evangelism. It is not about the people coming to the church and filling up the pews. It is about the church going to the community to tell them about the gospel. This must be done through action not just words. We can't draw the community in by just handing out flyers and tracts. We must go into the community, familiarize ourselves with the people and make connections with them. Parker states that "Evangelism through relationship allows for long-term discipleship. It allows missional community members to celebrate their relationships with friends, neighbors, and coworkers (Parker 2014:76)." This will make such a profound impact on the community and will open their hearts to the possibility of letting Christ in.

It is not to say that everyone in the community will welcome you. Some people are just set in their ways because of life experiences. We must not try to force our beliefs on them when they reject us. Continue to show love and kindness. Show them that you are there for them even if they don't want to receive Christ. Remain consistent with the community. Don't give up because everyone has not jumped on board right away. Continue to show concern for their wellbeing. Continue to build the trust of the community and keep their trust.

The church has done a poor job with evangelism. Sometimes our methods of trying to spread the gospel can be a bit harsh. This has caused unbelievers to run at the sight of anyone trying to share the gospel. Parker states that “Unfortunately, evangelism has often been so aggressive it has left a wake of unappreciative listeners and even aggressors toward the message of Christ (Parker 2014:76-7).” This is not what Jesus had in mind when he instructed us to go out and spread the good news.

We need a complete overhaul of the way we evangelize to the community. The church should not limit themselves to handing out tracts. This method is a way of providing information about Jesus, while avoiding interaction with the community. It will not work. Most often people will just throw the tracks in the garbage or avoid you before you can give one to them. Also, as stated earlier, people don’t want to read about the love of Jesus when they have been diagnosed with a terminal illness or about to lose their job. However, if you can show the love of Jesus through assisting them with their needs, that will get their attention.

One question that I have is what should a missional group do if they find a location to plant a church and are met with strong resistance? What if you do all the right things and the community just does not want to accept the church in their community. Do you leave the community and try to come up with a better way to reach the community? Do you just move on from that community and never come back?

My thoughts are that you continue to find ways to gain the community’s trust. However, there are some communities that have been scared by others who claim to be messengers of the gospel. So now they do not want to have anything to do with anyone who claims to be a follower of Christ. Therefore, they place up strong barriers of resistance so that they will not experience the same hurt again. It might be difficult to tear down those barriers.

### **Application**

I believe that following this concept will give the church a stronger foundation in the community. Now that I have read this paper, I can see some of the issues in my church. I would like to share some of what I learned in this paper with the leaders of the church. It is my prayer that the information will be well received. Often, leaders will see that the ship is sinking but will refuse to take advise from others on how to save the ship.

If I ever decide to start a new ministry or church plant, I will make it my business to assess the community to see what their needs are. I would provide questionnaires for the occupants of the community to fill out. This will give a clearer understanding of what they view as important to them. What they believe is a hinderance to their physical, spiritual and emotional development. By doing this, the community will begin to feel as if someone is interested in what happens to them.

The reading has shown me that it is important to choose the right people to be a part of your team. Don't just select people because they attend church. They must be mission minded and spirit filled. I would also provide questionnaires for those who want to be apart of the ministry to get a feel of who will be the right people for the group. The goal is to select people who can display Jesus to the community and not self. Also, I would follow what the reading suggested by developing an inclusive community so that members could invite family and friends. It wouldn't matter if they are Christians or not. People will participate and attend if they feel welcomed. The beliefs of the group will most likely take root in the unbelievers just by them observing the actions of others. You won't have to force your beliefs on them. The main thing is to show the community that it is not Christians against nonbelievers. Show them that Jesus loves everyone no matter what. Do this by showing his love through actions not words.

References

Parker, Robert (2014) *Missional Communities: Equipping Churches to Reach Their Local Context*. Dissertation