

WHAT IS CITY REACHING & WHAT CONSTITUTES A CITY REACHING INITIATIVE?

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CitiReach International defines city reaching as "the ongoing process of mobilising the whole body of Christ in a geographic area to strategically focus its resources on reaching the whole city with the whole Gospel, resulting in the transformation of the city and its societies." This definition builds upon the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization's affirmation and adds a statement regarding the transformational goal of city reaching initiatives.

The definition includes three fundamental components of the city reaching strategy; the whole Church, the whole city, and the whole Gospel. Dedication to mobilising the whole Church requires the initiative be inclusive of every believer in its approach. Commitment to the whole city requires that the initiative be comprehensive in its scope to include all peoples, problems, and conditions that affect community life. The whole Gospel requires methods that are holistic in nature requiring a balanced integration of proclamation and incarnation. A city reaching initiative by definition must be inclusive in approach, comprehensive in scope, and holistic in nature.

Are soup kitchens city reaching? Are homeless shelters city reaching? Are distribution projects of food, materials and media city reaching? At a popular level many would say "yes". At a technical level I would say "no". While these valuable ministries and many others contribute in meaningful ways to reaching a city, they do not in and of themselves meet the test of the three fundamental components of city reaching.

City reaching is not a synonym for every kind of ministry. It is not a modern day equivalent for the Great Commission. City reaching is a technical term referring to a new and highly specialised ministry approach that has at its core a strategy to mobilise the Church to spiritually and socially transform its community.

We must be clear on what city reaching is so we can do it intentionally and effectively and we must choose approaches that, if successful, will actually lead to the transformation of the community.

My experience is that many citywide initiatives are not city reaching initiatives at all because the approach is not designed to be inclusive of the whole Church, or it is limited to some part other than the whole of the community and its needs, and it frequently fails to use an integrated and balanced approach to words and works.

Foggy thinking and limited approaches will not get us to our destination. The approach we employ to reach cities must be capable of doing that and not every approach that gets passed off as city reaching is.

Critics argue that the conditions of sinlessness or perfection that transformation implies are unbiblical and impossible. They remind us that employing an agenda that has as its goal the Christianisation of our cities and nations in a desire to impose biblical values on others is equally unbiblical.

None of this is meant by those who use the word. Transformation is a reference to two points of time in a city's history; where the city is now and where it once was. For a growing number of cities the language that best describes the degree of societal change occurring between those two historic points is transformation.

When I became a Christian my life was transformed. I wasn't perfect or without sin, but I had been undeniably transformed. I moved from spiritual death to spiritual life and my lifestyle was changed dramatically. I was transformed. Since then I have been transformed again and again. There have been other experiences and periods in my life where the work of God has brought such dramatic and profound change that transformation remains the only word that could possibly describe the degree of change. And I, like you, hope to be transformed again and again as our lives are increasingly conformed to the image of Christ.

Deep and profound change is possible in human beings and is equally possible for the social organisms that we call cities and communities. George Otis concludes that it is less important where a city is on the transformation continuum than where it is compared to where it was.

Confusion has also arisen out of the two primary approaches to achieving our transformational goals.

The first approach emphasises Divine visitation and revival. In visitation God acts apart from the Church. He acts on the Church bringing revival and acts on society bringing spiritual awakening. When God visits a community He comes in a swift and powerful way that invades every corner of community life and results in broad and far-reaching societal change. He produces a level of change that no human effort could produce.

The second approach emphasises the Church's obedience to its missional responsibility. The Church is an apostolic people with an apostolic mission to transform peoples, places and the culture within which it lives. This approach emphasises not Divine visitation, but Divine partnership.

God works not apart from the Church but through it in a joint effort to heal pain, end suffering, release captives from human and spiritual forces, and to infuse culture with the transforming power and presence of God. This partnership produces incremental change that compounds to transformational proportions over time.

The first approach calls the Church to pray for visitation while waiting for His coming. It is internal in nature and calls people to purity and sanctification. It is a matter of personal devotion and spiritual preparedness for visitation. Let's pray and wait, they say.

The second approach calls the Church to plan for change and go with God into the harvest field to secure the fruit of its prayerful efforts. It is external in nature and calls people to create structures for change and commit to selfless service. Let's plan and go, they say.

Each is right. We must pray and wait for divine visitation but we must also plan and go in divine partnership. The problem comes with the tendency to do one or the other. If we only pray and wait we are disobedient to our call to mission. If we only plan and go we are oftentimes disappointed by limited results that do not fulfill our desire for change.

George Otis agrees that these two approaches are not two ends of a continuum that compete with and are in conflict with one another, but rather are two rails to the same track. They are two components of transformation that must be married into a single, cohesive, and dynamic approach that can produce transformational change in our communities.

How Are We Doing?

So, with all of this confusion how are city reaching initiatives doing worldwide?

As we coach, resource, and meet leaders from initiatives around the world my personal conclusion is that most city reaching initiatives are stuck. They have stalled and show few results and little progress toward genuine community impact.

We are entering the back half of a decadal window of opportunity regarding the Church's call to prayer, unity, and to the city and its transformation. More and more leaders are asking, "Where are the results?" They ask whether ten years of effort should have produced results that they are hard pressed to find. One marketplace leader in a prominent US city said to me, "Ten years of prayer mobilisation has produced no change in this city." He is not saying that there isn't more prayer in the city than ever before, because there is. He is not saying that Church leaders are not in better relationship with one another than ever before, because they are. What he is saying is that more prayer and better relationships should have resulted in observable and undeniable spiritual and social change in the city, and they have not. As I have shared this with prayer and city reaching leaders worldwide, with heavy hearts, most agree with the conclusion ... they are stuck. There are few results they can offer as proof of the effectiveness of city reaching.

Our window of opportunity is closing. We must demonstrate to others that calling Church leaders into authentic relationship around common vision can actually make a difference in the life and affairs of a city. A few, not many, just a few have already concluded that though the vision is divinely inspired the Church is simply not up to the task and will, once again, be the bottleneck to the accomplishment of God's purposes for our cities. It is time to show results that are observable and undeniable; results that are spiritual and social; results that make a difference in the lives of people and the affairs of the city.

What Are We to Do?

George Otis, the leading researcher of the global phenomena of community transformation writes in the Foreword of *City Reaching: On The Road to Community Transformation*,

Some readers may find Jack Dennison's ideas startling-especially the notion that God's ambitions for a community do not end with revival and church growth. But it is new ideas-or rediscovered old ones-that help us break out of the spiritual status quo.

Most of our questions about community transformation derive not from a lack of theology on the subject, but from our lack of experience with it. The phenomenon is still quite rare in the western world. Few of us have actually seen a neighbourhood or city transformed in all its dimensions. As a consequence, we're not sure where to catalogue such an experience.

A key question is, Are these results reproducible? Are there certain steps we can take to attract the transforming power of God into our own community? If the answer is "no," then there is nothing more to be done. If divine visitations are inherently arbitrary, then our approach can only be one of hope. Faith does not enter the equation.

If, on the other hand, divine visitations are the result of a cause and effect process, then we must discover the principles involved. We must follow the divine pre-scription, believing that if we do, God will honour His word and grace us with His presence.

The good news is that God wants to visit our communities. Indeed He desires to make them His habitation. But He will not be comfortable in our midst until we remove offending spiritual roots and cultivate an appetite for holiness, unity, faith, humility and prayer. In the end, divine visitation is as much our responsibility as it is God's.

If God always acted spontaneously there would be little for us to learn. We could only pray and hope He would come. If, on the other hand, He often follows an ordered approach in which He uses similar principles and processes over and over again in one context after another there is much for us to learn. The more we learn through careful observation and prayerful application the better able are we to adjust our behaviour and align our activity with the activity of God. I am convinced the latter represents what we experience most often in Divine interventions. The Good Shepherd wants us to hear His voice, understand His ways, obey His will, and accomplish His purposes.

Through thoughtful observation and biblical reflection principles have emerged that define and direct our CitiReach International approach to mobilising the Church for community transformation. Principles operationalized become essential activities.

Essential Activities - that must be applied throughout an initiatives' development:

- Draw leaders together into relationship with God and one another increasing the group's spiritual health and relational vitality. Prayer mobilisation has done much to foster more vital relationship with God and has produced many positive and beneficial results on the horizontal and relational levels among leaders and people.
- Cast a clear, compelling and comprehensive vision for transformation leading to an awakening of hearts and produces urgency to act.
- Identify and empower credible and competent spiritual leaders who shepherd the process of community transformation.
- Gather necessary information to establish a strategic plan to guide the Church's transformational efforts.
- Make a fresh commitment to individual and corporate learning around needed skills and effective ministry models.
- Renew the Church's commitment to employing the most effective and highest leverage ministries that produce measurable results through refocussing and retooling itself for increased effectiveness.

As we experience spiritual and relational health with God and one another, as our hearts are awakened to God's urgent call to the city, as leaders are empowered who have the credibility and competency to weave the Church community together around common vision, as we gather information that helps us accurately understand the condition and resources of the Church and the needs of the city, as we commit to discovering and utilising the most effective models that will genuinely make a difference in our city ... we will see transformational progress and change.

By my observation most citywide initiatives get stuck at their commitment to mobilise prayer and foster relational unity. Prayer has deeply impacted the Church around the world and many leaders who have experienced the joy of friendship with peers from diverse backgrounds for the first time in their lives have left little room for anything else. We have become stuck at the level of prayer and relationships. Many of these groups have lost momentum and are losing participants.

Momentum Builders represent the best practices from cities that are sustaining momentum and producing results.

Momentum Builder #1

- The Church increases its ministry effectiveness when it makes regular progress in EACH of the essential activities by engaging them SIMULTANEOUSLY rather than SEQUENTIALLY. When we approach matters sequentially we rarely get good enough at what we are doing to believe we are ready to move to the next level, so we don't. The result is that we stall out and lose momentum. Developing initiatives call us to fully commit to the priority of prayer and relationships (spiritual and relational health and vitality) but also to additional essential activities. Most initiatives are stalled at this first level. Simultaneous engagement means that over a twelve month period a healthy developing initiative will make progress in each of these areas.

Momentum Builder #2

- The Church increases its ministry effectiveness when it PRAYS & GOES. For example, committing to pray for a high risk neighbourhood should be accompanied by a commitment to mobilise and deploy human and financial resources into that neighbourhood to secure the fruit from our praying. Let's pray for children in nearby schools and also initiate a mentoring program that increases their life skills and produces relationships that can foster spiritual and social change in the individual and their family.

It seems to me that some people treat prayer like magic. When we pray for a lowering crime rate God doesn't just make crime disappear like magic, it doesn't just evaporate. He sends people to do the hard work of spiritual warfare and provide compassionate care that results in a reduction of crime. This could include local churches who adopt a neighbourhood for holistic service, law enforcement that makes a concerted effort to rid the neighbourhood of bad guys, human service agencies who provide job skills training and employment services, and more. When we announce that a significant reduction in crime is the result of our prayerful intervention alone we claim responsibility for something we have had only a partial role in accomplishing. Don't the efforts of these other groups represent a dimension of God's response to our intercession? There is a whole mix of factors and people that goes into redeeming a neighbourhood. The process may begin in prayer but it does not end there. We must pray and go!

Momentum Builder #3

- The Church increases its ministry effectiveness when it PARTNERS with other congregations in meeting community needs. Regional pastoral prayer cells, many of them have been meeting for years must begin to turn their attention outwardly and collaboratively meet high priority community needs. When this does not occur within a reasonable period of time one begins to question the authenticity of those relationships. The Church has earned the reputation of being concerned only for itself. Others have concluded this because the answer to every question is to do something else for ourselves; let's pray more, lets conduct another citywide prayer and worship event, lets build another building, lets tell people what we think about this issue, and so on. It is always about us. If we are going to become an agent of spiritual and social transformation it is going to have to be about them! It is time to see regional community based partnerships of congregations spring up across the city to address high priority community needs.

Momentum Builder #4

- The Church increases its ministry effectiveness when it collaborates not only with other congregations but also with other COMMUNITY SECTORS (government, education, law enforcement, etc). It is important that Church leaders meet with leaders representing the major sectors of community life. This is done to establish personal relationships with them, to learn about the city through their perspective and experience and to pave the way for collaboration with them. Viewing these leaders and groups as potential colleague creates opportunities for holistic ministry that can make a difference. Church leaders should build relationships with leaders from the marketplace, government and education sectors and especially with the Christians within those sectors.

Momentum Builder #5

- The Church increases its ministry effectiveness when it responds to an INVITATION FROM OTHERS for help. There is greater synergy and effectiveness when a school board invites the Church to begin a mentoring or reading program for its kids than when the Church simply does it without invitation.

We gain credibility and visibility that opens other doors when we are asked to do something that the school or police or government considers important to them and we do it well. Church leaders should meet with the leaders of these sectors and simply ask, "What do you need done that the Church can help with?" Whatever the answer, do it! In city after city where the Church does this well the Church has become a best friend to the city. Doors open wide, collaborations increase in number, lives are redirected, people gain a favourable impression of the Church, and bless the Lord, increasing numbers place their faith in Jesus Christ.

Momentum Builder #6

- The Church increases its ministry effectiveness when it helps the FAITH-BASED COMMUNITY of the city establish relationships with one another and with the pastoral community. The faith-based ministry community has been as disorganised, isolated and competitive as has been the congregational community. They need help in connecting with one another, especially those who do similar kinds of ministry in the city. It is important that the pastoral community be introduced to them since many of these ministries provide some of the most innovative and effective models available of holistic ministry. They are also good channels through which the Church can deploy its spiritual, human and financial resources into transformational efforts.

Momentum Builder #7

- The Church increases its ministry effectiveness when RESEARCH is completed that describes the unfinished task of the Church in the city. I think we have waited too long to begin this crucial momentum building activity. You cannot make strategic decisions based upon information you do not have. My experience is that our assumptions and presuppositions regarding the current condition of the Church and situation of the city are flawed and inaccurate. We must have accurate and up-to-date information describing the Church, the city and the spiritual forces influencing current circumstances in order to make good decisions that can produce real change.

Momentum Builder #8

- The Church increases its ministry effectiveness when pastors expose their congregation and congregational leadership team to VISION MATERIALS AND VISION EXPERIENCES. Pastors should be preaching and teaching the vision, principles, processes and practices of city reaching to their congregations and leaders. Pastors are encouraged to utilise the many means available to expose their congregations to God's call to the city and evaluate its implications for their congregation. Congregational leadership teams should begin to consider the implications of the city reaching vision for their congregation determining where refocussing and retooling may be required.

Momentum Builder #9

- The Church increases its ministry effectiveness when leaders of the local initiative employ an outside CONSULTANT/COACH. The consultant coaches the design of the initiative and works alongside local leaders in its development. We are convinced that with few exceptions citywide initiatives maintain a more optimal pace of development, maintain better focus and progress, and avoid many of the most common pitfalls when an experienced coach is used. The best learning and most effective practices are emerging from the grassroots. It is important that practitioners access the collective experience of the global learning community in leading their initiative. A coach, with broad experience and connection with practitioners worldwide helps provide a fail-safe against ineffectiveness and derailment.

CitiReach International works hard to operationalize the disciplines of the learning organisation. We are diligent observers and committed learners who dig out the best learning and practices from local initiatives. While an unending commitment to prayer and relationships (spiritual health and relational vitality) forms the foundation for city reaching these momentum builders represent the best practices and building blocks needed for genuine transformational results.

I trust this analysis and our latest learning will help you guide your city reaching initiatives into greater health, increased momentum, and ultimately to demonstrated "no doubt about it" impact of transformational proportions in the cities of this nation and the world.

Respectfully submitted by Dr. Jack Dennison – CitiReach International