



THIS MATTERS

What is a Missional Community?

Like many churches, The Austin Stone has a very clear vision of what we believe God has called us to. We phrase our vision this way:

To be a New Testament church existing for the supremacy of the name and purpose of Jesus Christ.

Through years of experience, prayer and study, we have gained a clearer understanding what it means to be the church in the city of Austin and accomplish this vision.

Our mission became this: *To build a great city, renewed and redeemed by a gospel movement, by being a church for the city of Austin that labors to advance the gospel throughout the nations.*

As we've mulled over that mission in our city, we were consistently pressed to consider that there are pockets of people throughout Austin and the nations who have not been renewed and redeemed by the gospel. There are so many in the city of Austin who would not even consider darkening the door of a Sunday worship service. When posed with this particular challenge, we realized that we HAD to change if we were ever going to see a movement ignited. That meant changing on the smallest level: we must declare and demonstrate the gospel in community on mission to every pocket of people for a movement to occur.

The Austin Stone, therefore, is in the process of becoming a network of missional communities. We are teaching small groups of people, called of God, joined by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who by the power of the Holy Spirit to pursue the renewal and redemption of their community and the nations together.

THE DEFINITION OF A MISSIONAL COMMUNITY

That vision, in many ways, sets the stage for us to talk more about a missional community. We are often asked, “What is a missional community?” Although definitions are limited in conveying the fullness of an idea, in summary a missional community, as we would define it, is:

A community of Christ followers on mission with God in obedience to the Holy Spirit that demonstrates tangibly and declares creatively the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a specific pocket of people.

Because it’s impossible to capture everything we mean into a sentence, let me take some time to expand on what we mean by this statement.

A COMMUNITY OF CHRISTIANS

The first piece of our definition that I want to highlight is this: “A Community of Christians”.

In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has redeemed a people for himself whom He empowers and sends to be his witnesses, as we see in John 20:21 and Matthew 28:16-20. Additionally, as Jesus indicates in John 13 and John 17, the community of God is sent for a purpose. We are called and sent to show a hurting, broken, and dying world that Jesus is who he says he is and did what he said he did. The purpose of Christian community has always been to demonstrate God’s character to the world. We do this as individuals for sure, but our communities are to be defined in this way too. This leads us to our next point.

ON MISSION WITH GOD

When we say, “On Mission with God”, we want to be clear about something. God is about bringing glory to His name and establishing His kingdom and reign in the world...it’s what He’s always been up to throughout redemptive history! He is saving and blessing a people through the finished work of Jesus that they would make disciples and bring his kingdom to the world around them. The life of the community is bound up in participating in God’s mission in the world and making disciples of Jesus.

Most churches would not disagree with us on this particular issue, but when it comes to practically working out what it means to make disciples, everyone has a different definition and strategy. We believe that mission of making disciples should play out in two primary ways in EVERY community, from large to small, and every individual:

DEMONSTRATE THE GOSPEL

The first way is to “*Demonstrate the Gospel Tangibly*”. Just as Jesus came demonstrating the kingdom through selfless acts of service, we actively look for opportunities to meet the felt and real needs of our neighbors. We seek to become a blessing to our neighbors, and demonstrate the reality of God’s new kingdom. When you look at Jesus, however, he did not simply stop at healing and meeting needs. He consistently spoke a true message of great hope to those whom he encountered. Just look at the story of the woman at the well: He met her where she was, but through her expressed need he spoke of the true needs of her heart.

DECLARE THE GOSPEL

Therefore, as communities patterned after Jesus’ life, we “*Declare the Gospel Creatively*”. A missional community listens to and understands the stories of their neighbors in order to be able to tell the Gospel Story in ways that are Good News to those specific people. We want our communities to wrestle with and understand how to speak the good news of Jesus’ perfect life, his sacrificial death, and his resurrection in power are indeed good news to their neighbors.

A POCKET OF PEOPLE

Finally, we turn to whom the community exists for: “*A Pocket of People*”. God’s grace in Jesus is good news for those in the church and those outside the church – we all need the gospel! Just as the Father sent the Son to a specific time, place, and people, so the Spirit does with the church, sending us to specific groups of neighbors. A missional community is seeking to wrap their lives up with the pocket of people that God has placed them in.

For us, a “neighbor” is anyone you cannot avoid or anyone who has needs that you have the resources to meet. Your neighbor may be those

who live next-door, those you work with, those you play with, or those with whom you share some sort of affinity. Your neighbor may also be someone you have little in common with but whom God has placed squarely in your path or specifically called or commanded you to care for. A missional community is a group of people who have a common set of neighbors and are intentionally living lives among them.

MORE THAN A BIBLE STUDY

We could probably expand several volumes on those simple statements above on theological, philosophical and practical levels, but I want to highlight one distinction that is important for us in pursuing these kind of communities at The Stone.

A missional community by nature is intended to be more than a typical bible study.

For us, a missional community is not just a bible study, it's not just a fellowship group, it's not just a social action club, it's not just a support group, and it's certainly not just a weekly meeting. Healthy missional communities include all of those things over time, but it's a family of missionaries learning to follow Jesus in every area of their lives.

A missional community is a group of people asking "What does loving my city and neighbor really look like?", and realizing Jesus may ask far more of me than I ever thought. The great news though, is that we are experiencing and knowing Jesus where He is...on mission to the broken and lost.

PRACTICES OF MISSIONAL COMMUNITIES

I often have a conversation that goes something along these lines: “Todd, that’s great that you have this cool vision and philosophy of missional communities who are making disciples in your city, but what does that ACTUALLY look like? What do these communities really do?”

We have a ton of great stories that we could share about how different groups have begun to take significant steps toward living out our vision. No collection of people is identical, however, there are a few practices that we have found to be very helpful in moving communities of believers to act differently and begin orienting their lives around making disciples.

These practices have helped us facilitate inclusive missional communities who genuinely grow deeply in their knowledge of the Lord, but also engage intentionally and meaningfully in pockets of lostness all over our city. A missional community is not just these three things, but these are helpful practices for a group of people on mission.

The three major components (although we have more) I want to highlight are:

1. Gathering as a family in the missional community meeting
2. Gathering as disciples in Life Transformation Groups
3. Gathering as missionaries in Third Places

THE FAMILY MEAL

Most people in the church are pretty familiar with the typical bible study meeting...so let’s start there. What do missional communities do with their weekly gathering time?

Although we really value studying the bible, and believe that everyone should be investing deeply in the Scriptures, we would humbly suggest that if your objective as a community is to make disciples of those who don’t yet know Jesus, you may need to change some of the ways you go about this particular rhythm. Let’s be honest, it’s a little awkward for anyone, even a mature believer, to enter into a brand new group of people who are talking about things you know little about.

For us as missional communities, the driving force of what we're after in our primary meeting time is behaving like a family. There are two critical pieces to orient this as a time for practicing family life.

Gathering around a meal

Great things happen around the dinner table, because it's pretty hard to "fake it 'til you make it" when you're eating with one another for the better part of an hour. More often than not, the most significant conversations I have happen around the table. Eating together also teaches us in many ways to behave like normal people.

Participating in a meal together is a symbol of your fellowship and relationship with one another, and we think it should be a regular practice of every community, because it's a regular practice of most families.

Low barrier bible study

The second component of our primary meeting time is Bible study. I've led and coached a lot of small groups and missional communities. One thing I often observe is that Bible studies that most groups do make a lot of assumptions about the knowledge of those entering into it – that people have a knowledge of the story line of the Bible, that people know how to study the Scriptures well for themselves, that someone has a copy of the curriculum that you're going through, and the list could go on. Increasingly, I'm finding those assumptions actually create significant barriers for new people entering your community. Most Bible studies are really hard for the average Joe to engage in.

We would humbly suggest that you do two things in this time – lower the barrier of entry into the conversation. We want to study the bible so that it doesn't require any minimum knowledge to meaningfully participate. Secondly, we want to create an environment where individuals are expected to contribute, not simply come and consume. We think this will help us grow in obedience, not simply just growing in knowledge.

As a leader you can spend your time helping people be disciples and interacting as family, rather than preparing a rushed bible study, or teaching a bible study lesson.

LIFE TRANSFORMATION GROUPS (LTGS)

The tension that we've run into from many people is the desire to keep things "low bar" enough that outsiders can feel welcome, but also have a place where believers can "dig deep" and seek out some of the harder questions and doctrines of our faith; we often feel as though we have to give up one for the other.

Instead, let us propose another solution. We're encouraging groups that desire to "go deeper" to start what are called life transformation groups, or LTGs for short. These are smaller groups of two or three believers of the same gender that commit to meeting outside of the group meeting time.

There are three primary elements to this kind of group:

4. **Hear** from God's Word and **Obey** what you have learned
5. **Repent** of sin and **Believe** the gospel together
6. **Consider** opportunities we have to share Christ and **Pray** by name for lost people

Our hope is that these groups will help you and other believers in your group to begin measuring depth by obedience, rather than simply knowledge.

THIRD PLACE

So at this point, we've reoriented a typical small group to more resemble a family, but how do we actually start creating space and margin to integrate non-Christians? How do we engage in ways that will naturally integrate someone with questions so they can experience our community?

You've probably heard the term "third place" before. Starbucks used the concept in their marketing strategy. A third place was another space to frequent besides your work and your home. This third place is somewhere to find refuge and a sense of place.

In a similar way, in the Church, we need to create a third place. Your first place is often the Sunday gathering. Your second place is your weekly missional community meeting. **And now we need a third place as a way to cultivate your mission together as a community: a place to introduce**

your lost friends to your community. The purpose of this third place will be to create some **neutral** ground that anyone would **naturally** go to on a **regular** basis.

We think it's important for a missional community to create a **neutral** space to go to that isn't the Sunday worship service and not your Bible study. You want a place where you can bring your lost friends that doesn't demand that they have to enter into another culture. This is informal, casual and non-committal. They need to see and relate to Christians in a natural and relaxed environment. They need to feel that your group really enjoys being together and third place is a great environment for this to happen.

So where do missional communities do this? A third place should be determined by your mission: the people you're trying to reach. With those people in mind, ask the question, "Where can I bring them that will be a natural place for them to meet and enjoy my Christian friends?" As a community, where can you gather *regularly* and *naturally*?

For some of our downtown missional communities, this may be an after work happy hour. For some of our moms, this might be a park where they gather often. For others folks, it might be a coffee shop, or a restaurant, maybe the community pool, or maybe even their home itself.

The key to a third place is that *we are intentionally creating a place for our lost friends to become a part of our community.* **A community where they can belong to before they believe** so that they may hear the gospel from our lips, see it changing our lives and believe in Jesus as He moves in them.

HOW DO I DO THIS GIVEN MY SCHEDULE?

Most people, after we talk about these things, get nervous. The typical question is "you mean I have to do ALL of this in one week?!?". What we're not saying is that you need to have three meetings a week instead of just one, although it would be awesome. What we are saying and teaching is that over time, a healthy community will develop these patterns as an integrated part of their life together. There will be seasons in groups where third place becomes the primary gathering because of great opportunities to connect with those who don't know Jesus. And

other seasons where there is more intentional time for the community because of significant loss or conflict.

In the same way a nuclear family has different seasons of life and different needs at different times, so too do missional communities. These practices have been very helpful for our missional communities to engage the people of our city with the gospel.