

TRANSITIONING

YOUR CHURCH TO MISSIONAL COMMUNITIES

BY TODD ENGSTROM



SATURATE
RESOURCES

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IT TAKES TIME

The vision of **The Austin Stone** has always been “to be a New Testament Church, existing for the supremacy of the name and purpose of Jesus Christ.”

Early on as a church, we were committed to the authority of the Bible and the supremacy of Christ. Additionally, the things that made us unique as a church were a willingness to try new things and a strong commitment to necessary change.

At the outset of the church, preaching and worship were definitively our core competencies. It's hard not to be when you've got a guy like **Matt Carter** filling the pulpit and **Chris Tomlin** leading worship! We continue to pursue excellence in these areas as a church. However, early on we also began to feel a sense of dissatisfaction with simply doing church on Sundays.

Several different things throughout that time led us to consider **missional communities**. From the outset we had a desire to be a church that led people to Jesus and changed our city, and we began to analyze our strategy and structure in light of that desire.

ASKING TOUGH QUESTIONS

In 2006, our lead team was reading through *Transformation* by Bob Roberts, and the book posed this question: “What if the church was the missionary?” That's when some light bulbs started going off. Rather than simply operating as usual, we began to examine everything we did in light of **adopting the posture of a missionary**. As we processed that question, we realized that when we aimed at community, we missed out on both community and mission, but when we aimed at mission, community almost always resulted.

Also, we started surveying church-planting movements around the world, and some very clear patterns emerged. We realized very few of them were characteristic of our existing communities at The Austin Stone.

Finally, we began to see mission as central to the New Testament church as we studied Acts together. In many ways the mission to make disciples was the organizing principle of every facet of that church. So, we just couldn't keep doing church the way we have been doing it after we considered all these things.

A LEARNING JOURNEY

Those early years were filled with many questions, several challenges, and a lot of learning along the way. One of the things I continue to be grateful for is the leadership of Matt Carter and Kevin Peck, as they are men who embrace change and are willing to lead through it. Convinced we HAD to change, our church began the process of transition to missional communities in late 2006.

We made several mistakes in our transition, adopting more of a “Ready, Fire, Aim” approach, but God was faithful and our people were forgiving. We learned **how powerful**



stories are in shaping vision, and how necessary structure and practices are in persevering in mission.

Although the process has been long and difficult, it has brought more joy in Christ, obedience to the Spirit and God's Word, and greater fruitfulness in disciple making in our city. We have learned a ton about leading people through change, a rapidly growing church, and people into everyday rhythms of community and mission.

TAKE YOUR TIME

Perhaps the single greatest lesson we have learned in the process is this; it takes time for churches, communities, and individuals to change. In fact, a transition from start to finish takes the better part of a decade! The process is long, but in my opinion the outcome is worth it. We see more and more people pursuing God's mission to glorify Himself through making disciples in a community on mission. Austin may not look extremely different now, but we are trusting God will change this city.



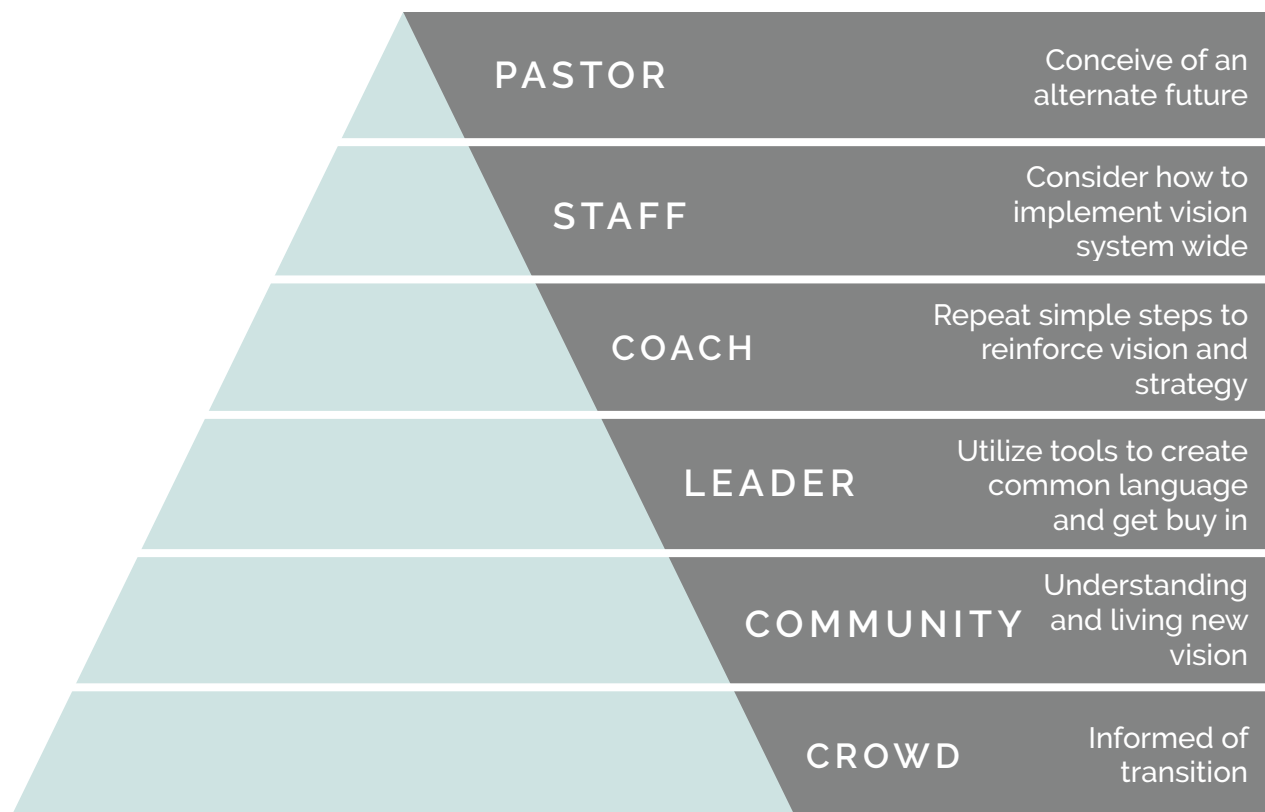
TWO WAYS TO TRANSITION

Generally speaking, if you are considering a transition to missional communities in an **existing church**, there are two routes you can go: top down or bottom up. Each has their pros and cons.

The Austin Stone opted to go with the first: top-down leadership. Although we utilized a lot of the principles of bottom-up change, we went very quickly to reorienting our entire church around a new paradigm for ministry. Let's start with top-down-driven transition.

CHANGING FROM THE TOP DOWN

Typically most churches are structured with some amount of hierarchy. Depending on your size, you'll have different layers represented, but generally the structure is similar. For the record, I'm not advocating right or wrong; I'm just describing what is most often the case in church organizations. Churches generally look something like the chart below:



On the left side, you see the way leadership most often works, while on the right side you see how information typically flows. Transitioning with a top-down strategy means that the people at the top of the organization see a preferred future and then begin to architect a transition for the entire structure.



Keys to Success

For this kind of strategy to be effective in a transition, the senior leadership must buy into the change. Also, a top-down strategy will be very ineffective without a vision and commitment to the transition for the long haul.

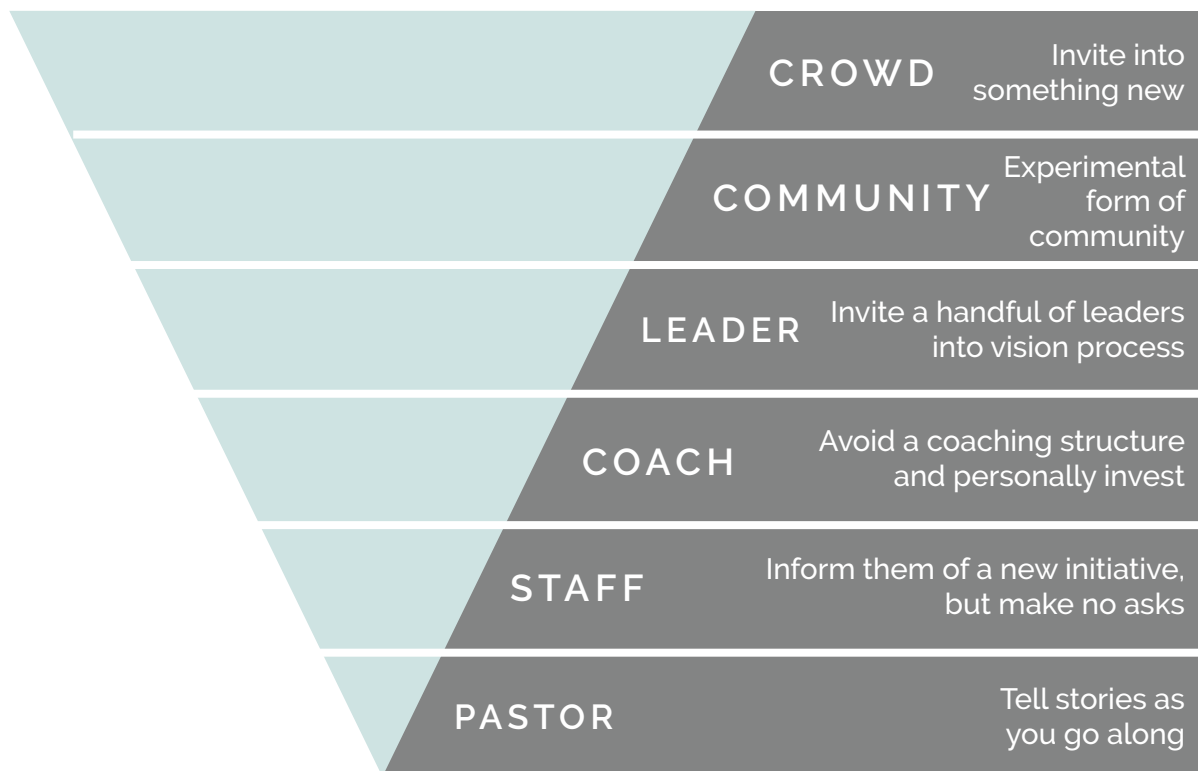
Pros/Cons

The pros of transitioning this way are a larger impact on the organization and a greater percentage of innovators inside the church being released into ministry. Generally speaking, if you communicate a vision to more people, more people will adopt that vision quicker.

The cons of transitioning this way, however, are as follows. First, you will often lose people who are committed to your previous vision for ministry. Second, you may have a high number of people buy into the vision, but often their commitment to and understanding of the vision is shallow. Generally, when vision implementation challenges arise, many people will revert back to previous patterns and practices.

CHANGING FROM THE BOTTOM UP

Transitioning from the bottom up is an alternate strategy. Generally speaking, you're starting a new initiative at the ground level with a small number of people. Words such as "pilot" and "experiment" are thrown around, and ultimately you're hoping the new initiative will be wildly successful and influence the ascending layers of an organization. It generally looks something like the chart below:



In the bottom-up transition, you're starting in the crowd and community and filtering stories and vision up the communication chain.

Keys to Success

Keys to making this kind of transition work are piloting new initiatives slowly throughout time and keeping track of your learning along the way. If you have ambitions to influence an entire organization, it is critical to try the new strategy yourself so you have first-hand experience and can answer questions and provide stories to inspire people.

Pros/Cons

The pros of **transitioning a church** like this are the lower risk of alienating people and the greater amount of time to learn what challenges lie ahead for others who will attempt to change.

The cons of this kind of transition are the slower pace towards and limited scope of changing an entire organization. Because of the deliberate under-the-radar approach, it is often difficult to convince a senior leadership team of an organization of the effectiveness of the particular strategy.

WHAT DID THE AUSTIN STONE DO?

In our transition, we spent one year in the piloting stage but planned all along to make a major top-down transition because our senior leadership was well bought-in and ready for change. We certainly saw the benefits of making a major transition (lots of people tried missional communities, and great stories came from the transition) but we also experienced several of the drawbacks to this approach (unnecessarily offending some people, frustrating people because we didn't have all the answers, failing to keep pace with necessary support structures, etc.).

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

I don't know each of your circumstances, but in general, I would say you ought to consider the top-down approach if:

- Your senior leadership team is already on board for a transition.
- The people in your church are generally flexible and willing to change.
- You believe missional communities are the best way to make disciples in your city.

I would strongly urge you to consider a bottom-up approach if:

- A senior leader is reticent or not fully vested in the change.
- Your people are very committed to another model of ministry.
- You are looking for a "best-practice" or a new method.

The following will unpack our strategy for undergoing a top-down transition from small groups to missional communities.



CREATING A SENSE OF URGENCY

There's nothing more important than open, honest, and convincing dialogue about what is true from the Scriptures and where your church simply doesn't match up.

Change happens best when the whole church really wants it and there is a sense of unction or urgency. Cultivating this sense of need can come in many different ways – identifying opportunities in your city, pointing out weaknesses of the current model, showing statistics of lostness, and a variety of other methods. We have used these tools and more.

At The Austin Stone, we have found that for the believer, a sense of urgency must first and foremost be grounded in **conviction from God's Word**. We can certainly have a sense of necessity of change in our minds, but deeply-rooted conviction begins with a certain kind of heart. Namely, a heart that desires to be conformed to the image of Christ through obedience to the Word of God.

This isn't simply a matter of **showing people statistics about lostness** or talking about a stagnant church, although those tactics can be helpful. Urgency born out of conviction from God's Word will lead to repentance, which is the single most necessary step in transition.

WHAT CONVICTIONS DO I NEED?

Practically speaking, if you are considering a transition to missional communities, you need to be convinced and convince others from the Scripture that:

- The purpose of Christian community is to be an apologetic for the gospel.
- If a believer and community are not seeking to make disciples of Jesus, they are being disobedient.
- The church is far more than **simple attendance at events**.

I'm sure there are more convictions, but those above will impel you to consider why you must transition your church. Perhaps even more critical is **showing how your current model of ministry is not fulfilling these beliefs**. What is most important is open, honest and convincing dialogue about what is true from the Scriptures and where your church simply doesn't match up.

The single largest challenge we faced in the transition was helping our leadership and people see how our actions as communities did not actually match our beliefs. Very few people were coming to faith, very few of our old groups could state a sense of purpose beyond themselves, very few were intentionally seeking to invite neighbors, and most of our people were content to simply gather at our functions.

Surely there had to be more to church than that! Missional community became rooted in conviction, but also practically applied into action.



WHAT CAN I DO?

In order to help foster these convictions in your leadership and your wider community, you can:

- Tell stories of other communities who are living a different way.
- Provide a case for why this strategy is more fully biblical than the previous one.
- Start honest discussions about the health of disciples in your church relative to God's word, specifically in Acts.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP

Finally, urgency must exist primarily in your leadership. In order for wholesale change to be successful, I think you'll need ~75% of your leadership team to buy into the change. If you want to transition your church and be effective in the long haul, spend a considerable amount of time and energy building urgency and conviction in your core leadership before moving onto the next steps. Without this sense of conviction from your leadership, a transition to missional communities is doomed to be simply another program in the church.



FORMING A STRATEGIC TEAM TO LEAD TRANSITION

This team you build needs to be more captivated by the idea of your church becoming something, rather than simply excited about implementing a new strategy!

After you have created a sense of urgency and convinced people that change is necessary, the next step is to cultivate a team to guide the transition. This often takes strong leadership and visible support from key people within your organization. Managing change isn't enough – you have to lead it!

To lead change, you need to bring together a coalition of influential people whose influence comes from a variety of sources, **not just those with formally recognized roles**. These kinds of people can be found from your pulpit to the children's ministry to a greeter who knows everyone's name.

WHO ARE THE INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE?

Particularly, I would focus on a few groups of people:

- The primary communicators in your church.
- The leaders who allocate resources for the church.
- Point leaders for existing ministries.
- Individuals who seem adaptable, entrepreneurial, or generally attracted to change.

Often times it can be relatively easy to get a visionary or preacher excited about change, **but the real hard work often comes with those tasked with the implementation of the existing vision**. You will want to involve these kinds of people in your guiding coalition or task force, allowing them to buy into the process of change, not just the vision. The Austin Stone spent solid year in vision casting, strategic planning, and piloting with this particular team. It was critical that our stakeholders didn't just hear a vision, but contributed to the development of the process of change.

Often, this will be the best way to turn those who are reluctant at first into the most committed to the change. Once formed, your "change coalition" needs to work as a team building momentum and strategy for a wide-scale launch of this new vision and practice.

WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT NOW?

In this stage, it is important that you:

- Identify the true leaders and stakeholders in your church.
- Obtain conviction about the transition from these key leaders.



- Create collaborative environments where leaders can contribute to the vision and strategy.
- Identify weakness in your team, or expertise you may be lacking.

HOW DID THIS LOOK FOR THE AUSTIN STONE?

Transition at The Austin Stone didn't happen overnight, but rather over the course of years. Honestly, we expected it to go much faster than it did! If we had built our team for the transition solely based on execution, not conviction, I am certain that we would not be pursuing missional communities today. This team you build needs to be more captivated that your church would become something new, rather than simply excited about implementing a new strategy!



CRAFTING A VISION FOR MISSIONAL COMMUNITIES

It isn't just about having a catchy phrase and some branding but having a fully-formed understanding of why you are making a transition and communicating the details of your transition in a variety of ways over time.

After you've created a sense of urgency, and while you're rallying a team, you need to be crafting a vision for missional communities in the life of your local church. Specifically, there are three areas that you need to focus on:

- Answering the question “why?”
- Providing a theological, philosophical and practical foundation for a missional community,
- Crafting a short narrative for the vision,

ANSWERING “WHY?”

When you first start thinking about change with your leadership team, there will probably be many great ideas and solutions floating around. I'm the kind of guy that wants to move immediately into problem-solving and execution mode. I crave action!

Before you move into execution, **you need to spend time crafting a vision, and specifically answering the question “why are we transitioning?”** This is often tied to the same threads you utilized to create a sense of urgency and the need for change.

The answer to that question needs to be something that resonates with your general population of people, rather than just a group of bought in leaders. While every Christian in your church should care that there are lots of people who haven't heard the gospel, for most of them statistics on the lostness of a city aren't terribly compelling. Why should a person who has served faithfully in your children's ministry for years care about the shift you are making? What would resonate deeply with someone who has been marginally connected to your church? To be effective here, consider the things that your most often communicate from your pulpit that has resonated with your people and tie into this thread. If you have built your church on the foundation of being a safe place for the family, then a good “why?” would be “To become more like God's family.” If you've built on a foundation of good Bible teaching, then a good “why?” would be “To do what the Bible says.”

At The Stone, we didn't actually begin our transition by talking about missional communities at all. We by focusing on the question: “**Why do churches die?**” To this day, it remains one of our most popular sermon series and was a watershed series for our church body.



THOROUGHLY UNDERSTANDING YOUR VISION

At The Stone, we tend to build almost any vision for ministry through the grid of:

- Theology – What is true from Scripture?
- Philosophy – How do I apply what is true into this culture?
- Practice – What am I going to do based on my theology and philosophy?

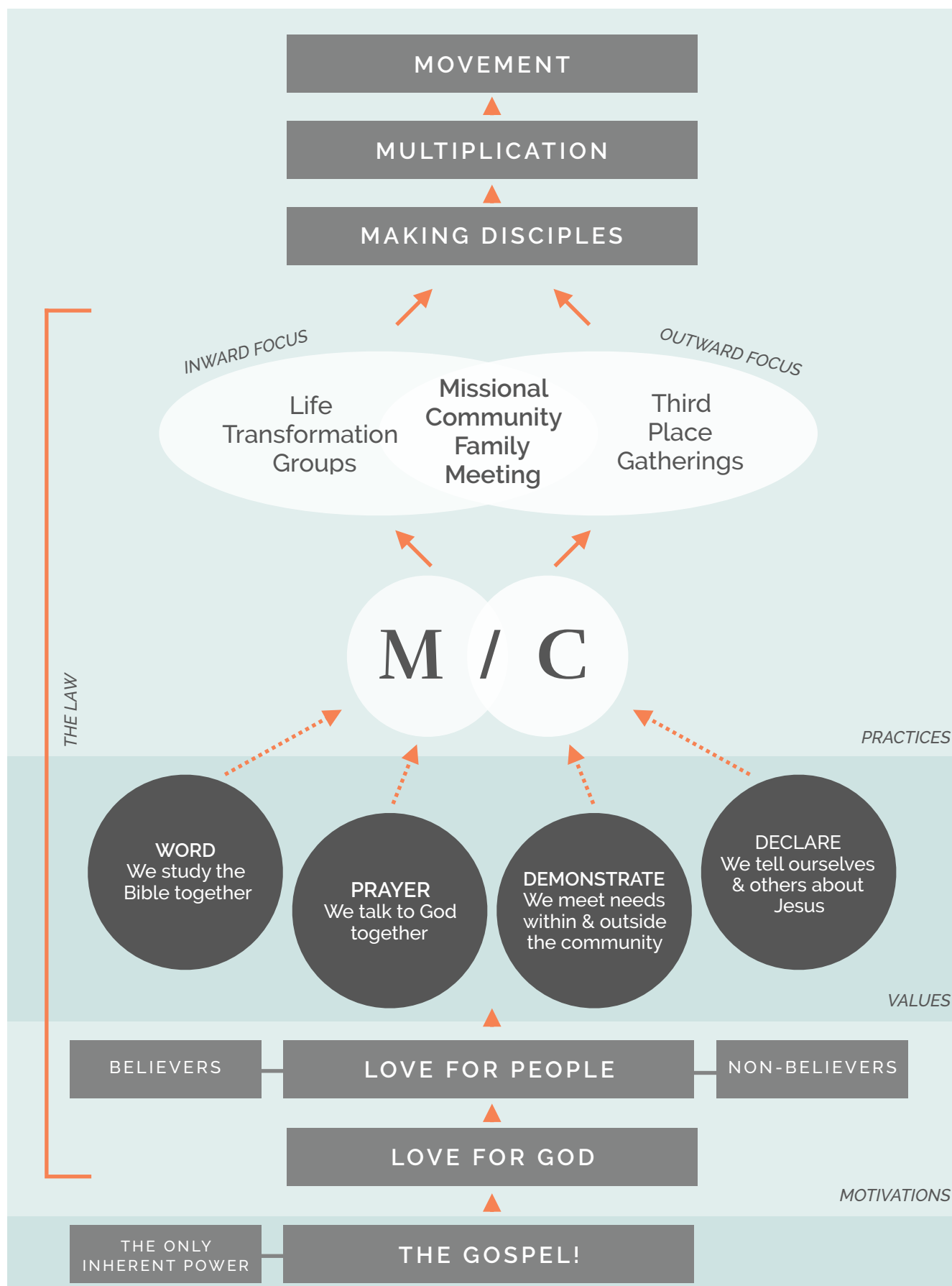
We didn't do this very well when we transitioned to missional communities, but over time our vision solidified into this grid. Over time we realized that missional community is a "what"...it's a vehicle for living out the mission of God in the context of community. **Missional community for us is a collection of practices that foster obedience to Jesus as a community.**

Cultivating obedience to Jesus is a "how" or a philosophy. This is a guiding principle that informs what we do – we preach a certain way because we want people to obey Jesus. We have certain ministries that help us foster obedience to the Word in different ways. We want to help **consumeristic**, materialistic, and **individualistic** people in our culture see what it means to follow Jesus, because the gospel changes everything.

The gospel changes everything is a "why." Jesus, who came to earth in the flesh, lived a perfect life, died an atoning death on the cross, and was resurrected from the dead is the fulcrum of human history. He changes *everything* – our identity, our community, our purpose, our affections, and our ultimate destiny.

Linking your practice to a philosophy that is driven from a theology integrates multiple concepts to an overall vision that people can grasp over time. Practically speaking, this is what drove us to our Missional Community Roadmap:





UTILIZING NARRATIVE TO COMMUNICATE VISION

The final thing you need to consider is answering the question “why transition?” is to make sure the answer captures the heart, not just the head. Facts are great for informing the mind, but stories are most effective at stirring the heart.

Answering the question with something like “we’re going to transition to missional communities because we’ll be much more effective in making disciples in our city” may be right, but it’s not something that people can really grab hold of. To build on the examples above, consider something like “our families are becoming like God’s family” or “we’re putting the Bible into action.” Communicating your vision through a story trumps this. Two great examples of how we have done this at The Austin Stone are our [vision for 100 People](#) and a few stories of missional community life ([here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

Stories will powerfully communicate the vision for your transition, so find ways you can tell them compellingly!

CONCLUSION

A clear vision can help everyone understand why you’re asking them to do something. When people see for themselves what you’re trying to achieve, then the directives they’re given tend to make more sense. It isn’t just about having a catchy phrase and some branding, but having a fully-formed understanding of why you are making a transition and communicating the details of your transition in a variety of ways over time.

On a real practical note, here are some things you can do:

- Determine the values that are central to the change, and then answer the question “why?”
- Develop a short summary (one or two sentences) that captures what you “see” as the future of your church.
- Ensure that your team can describe the vision in five minutes or less in their own words.
- Create some visual aids and stories that you can use in different environments to facilitate communication.



COMMUNICATING THE VISION FOR MISSIONAL COMMUNITIES

Simply because everyone can articulate the same core values does not mean the vision has taken hold.

After working hard to craft a vision for missional communities, you've got to start thinking about how you're going to effectively communicate it to people. Hopefully, you've gotten some practice as you've cast vision to your strategic team, and now you are thinking about communicating the vision more broadly. In my experience, communication consists of three things:

- The message
- The medium
- The audience

We covered most of the “message” component in the crafting a vision post, so I'll spend most of my time focusing on the medium and the audience in this post.

What you do with your vision after you create it will determine your success in the transition. **You can create the most compelling vision and the most airtight strategic plan, but they remain ideas until you actually communicate them to others.**

COMMUNICATE TO LEADERS

Your first audience ought to be leaders within your church. Make sure you communicate a vision to leadership before you roll it out to a broader audience! It's crucial for long-term success that your current leaders have a sense of ownership and buy-in to the vision.

The vision you are communicating will probably have competition from other communications within your church as well. Communicate the vision frequently and powerfully, and embed it within everything you do with leaders for a season. Also, consider a time with leaders when you can have their undivided attention. There are often “slow” seasons in the overall life of the church – make use of them! Whenever you have a captive audience or a free communication channel, use it. Focus on repetitive messaging, rather than only communicating to the largest possible audience.

Finally, don't solely do a “vision meeting” or something of the sort to communicate your vision. Instead, talk about it every chance you get. Use the vision daily to make decisions and solve problems. When you keep it fresh on everyone's minds, they'll remember it and respond to it. The single greatest reason change fails is that vision isn't communicated repeatedly over time!

When considering mediums to utilize, I would aim for in-person communication to groups of leaders, and specifically doing it in a way that invites feedback and questions. Without



your leaders having a way to contribute to the vision, it will be very difficult for them to have a sense of ownership of it.

COMMUNICATE TO THE CHURCH

After you've communicated the vision to your leaders, now it's time to start communicating to the entire church community. With respect to mediums, you should use whatever you have at your disposal. Particularly, you will want to consider:

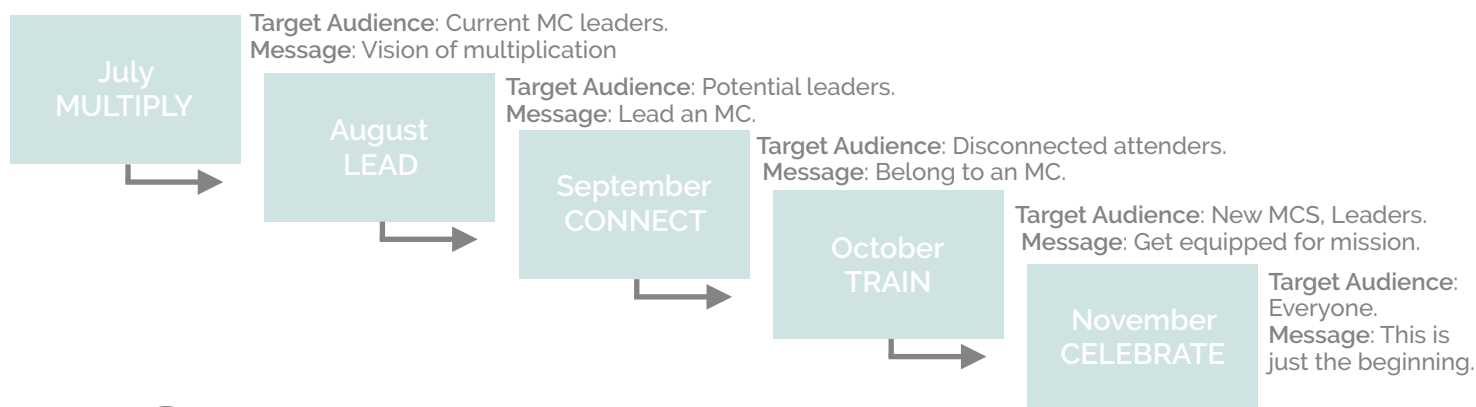
- Preaching the vision from the pulpit.
- Communicating the vision through live testimonies or short films.
- Cultivating the vision through small group curriculum.
- Creating written resources to share with your community.
- Focusing all informational communication around the vision.
- Utilizing all ministries leadership channels to communicate the vision contextually to other ministries.

When it comes to the message of the vision, communicate a strategically simple message, but do it in a variety of different ways. **Simply because everyone can articulate the same core values does not mean the vision has taken hold.** Communicating the vision creatively with different hooks, different applications, and different illustrations will provide insight for a variety of people into what you're trying to accomplish.

RUNNING A CAMPAIGN OR ALIGNMENT SERIES

Perhaps the most effective strategy for communicating your vision to your church is a church-wide campaign or an alignment series. The basic idea is utilizing every channel of communication and every place people are gathered for ministry over a prolonged season to communicate the same message – from children's ministry all the way to the pulpit. These kinds of series take an extraordinary amount of planning to execute, and clarity in everything we have addressed in this series so far.

Below is the basic communication plan for our most recent campaign to redefine missional community and launch a significant number of new missional communities at The Austin Stone:



As you can see, we spent 5 months communicating the vision in different ways to different groups of people, and this was only to reinforce an existing vision!

CONCLUSION

I probably can't do justice to the entire process of communicating a vision to the various groups of people inside your church, but here are a few things to take away if you're considering a transition:

- Talk often about your vision.
- Openly and honestly address peoples' concerns and anxieties.
- Apply your vision to all aspects of your church.
- Lead by example and live out the vision you want to see.

If you'd like more information on a campaign strategy, [contact me](#) and I can send you details on how we approach campaigns. Also, my friend Mark Howell has written extensively on [effective campaigns here](#).



EMPOWERING OTHERS TO ACT

One of the greatest barriers to the vision becoming reality occurs when leaders don't provide a simple, understandable way to live out the vision for missional communities.

If you follow these steps and reach this point in the change process, you've been talking about your vision and building buy-in from all levels of the organization. Hopefully, your church wants to get to work! Often this stage in the change is when you discover barriers to the transition. Certain people may have verbally agreed to the vision, but when it comes time to make sacrifices or “kill sacred cows”, people can become resistant. You also will inevitably find systems and structures that create barriers to the vision being fully lived out.

EMPOWER WITH THE GOSPEL

For most leaders who are architecting change, they are tempted is to grow frustrated and impatient when barriers are encountered. As one of those kinds of leaders, I want to encourage you to remember the gospel in these moments. Thanks be to God that Jesus never threw in the towel on me, even when I was resistant to change and being disobedient! I consistently rehearse Romans 5:8 in seasons of transition “but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” **Jesus was patient with me, and by the power of the Spirit, I can sacrifice my preferences and timeline to love and serve others well.**

Keeping the gospel front and center as you encounter obstacles to the vision for your church will empower you and others to act out of proper motivations. Regardless of the barriers you may face, they are never an excuse to cease loving a brother or sister in Christ.

If you find pockets of resistance or structures that need to be rebuilt (which you will!), patiently work towards change over time, rather than immediately firing someone or blowing up an entire structure. There might come a time when you need to shut something down but err on the side of patience and bear with one another in love.

YOU NEED A PLAYBOOK

Part of empowering people to act is casting compelling vision and keeping the gospel at the foundation, but the people you are leading also need a playbook. You can tell a football team to score lots of touchdowns, but without a clear game plan and set of plays, chances are good you won't score many points at all. **One of the greatest barriers to the vision becoming reality occurs when leaders do not provide a simple, understandable way to live out the vision for missional communities.**

In my experience, church leaders tend to be excited about ideas – philosophies of ministry, theology, and vision – but tend to be very careless when it comes down to living those things out in the context of daily life. The single greatest error we made in our transition was not clarifying exactly what we wanted our communities to do, and how we wanted them to do it. Over time we have corrected that error.



SIMPLE, REPRODUCIBLE, TRANSFERRABLE

After you have completed a campaign, I would strongly urge you to focus on cultivating simple, reproducible and transferable practices that reinforce missional community life. In my experience, most of the people at The Austin Stone were bought into the vision but needed some simple things to do.

For us, we want our missional communities to be committed to **God's Word**, to be faithful in **Prayer**, to **Demonstrate the Kingdom** tangibly and **Declare the Gospel** creatively to a pocket of people. That's the "what".

The "how" is by gathering in **Life Transformation Groups**, gathering in a **Family Meal**, and gathering in a **Third Place**.

We've stuck with these practices and values for five years now, and they have become the predominant way in which our church practices community together. It's taken time and a lot of different training, but focusing on a few things that are understandable and you can do really well will help people act the vision of being a church that makes a dent in the Great Commission.



CELEBRATING WINS

If you simply report out percentages without stories attached, it is far too easy to forget that you are leading and discipling real people with real problems and that the real Jesus is actually moving in your midst.

I have to confess that celebration is not my strong suit. For one reason or another, my greatest challenge in leadership is consistently enjoying and celebrating the work that the Lord has accomplished in and through my team. This post is one that I need to read and re-read myself, but I pray it serves you well despite my own flaws.

While the Gospel, the Spirit, and the Word are the bedrock of any motivation, urgency and vision are certainly powerful motivators in leadership when it comes to starting something new.

Celebration, on the other hand, is probably the single greatest sustainer for the work of ministry. Without celebration of what God has done, over the course of time, your team implementing the transition will likely succumb to joyless, mechanical leadership, or worse yet, burnout. So how can we foster a culture of celebration?

HOW SHOULD WE CELEBRATE?

I've already confessed my weakness in this area, and early in ministry, I thought celebration just meant I had to acknowledge past work, and then would simultaneously cast vision for the future and plow forward into the next task. It turns out that can pretty demoralizing!

I've learned that you need to do two things to celebrate effectively:

- Take special moments and events to **ONLY** celebrate.
- Celebrate small victories every time you gather.

With respect to creating special moments dedicated solely to celebration, I realized my weakness in this area when we hosted an event to do only that with our MC leaders, and people had a hard time figuring out how they should respond. Some wondered why we should gather if we weren't talking about "business," and others just kept waiting for us to do a bait and switch, casting some kind of vision. They were somewhat surprised when all we did was have a great meal together, and enjoy some quality fun!

After that event, I knew that I had failed to cultivate a culture of celebration simply because the people I was leading found it unfamiliar. Our team still struggles somewhat in this area, but by God's grace and through active repentance, we are changing into a more celebratory people.

Part of that repentance is taking the opportunity in every environment – team meetings, leader gatherings, coaching meetings, pastoral appointments – to encourage one another and celebrate the grace of God in our lives, our church, and our city. I've been asking God to give me and our team a spirit of encouragement, which means that we seek every opportunity to identify, rejoice in, and speak of the work of Christ. **Creating a culture of celebration means making it a discipline, not just throwing an occasional party.**



CELEBRATE IN TWO THINGS

I once **had a friend say to me** “metrics motivate your thinking and stories stir the soul.” I’ve taken this thinking to heart, and it is the primary grid that I use to encourage celebration. Especially with respect to a transition, you need to establish some short-term, observable wins for your team. Simply “transition your groups” is not an accomplishable goal. Think through something like “have individual conversations with 90% of leaders and cast a vision for transition” as a good short-term metric.

For medium-term goals, you can see how we assess missional communities over time in the series on **"Assessment"**, and the trends over time in a transition in **"Data and Conclusions."** While metrics are important, they cannot be the only way you celebrate.

I cannot emphasize enough the need to share stories – they bring metrics to life. If you simply report out percentages without stories attached, it is far too easy to forget that you are leading and discipling real people with real problems and that the real Jesus is actually moving in your midst. Stories inspire the heart to persevere, so find a way to celebrate them!

On a practical note, take time in every meeting to ask for and share stories of what God is doing in the transition. I would also recommend that you share stories not just of radical success, but also attempts that have produced failure. When you share where people are trying and struggling, you will both encourage those who aren't seeing amazing fruit in leadership, as well as identify potential barriers that you probably weren't aware of.

Stories are a powerful way to celebrate, so continue telling them!



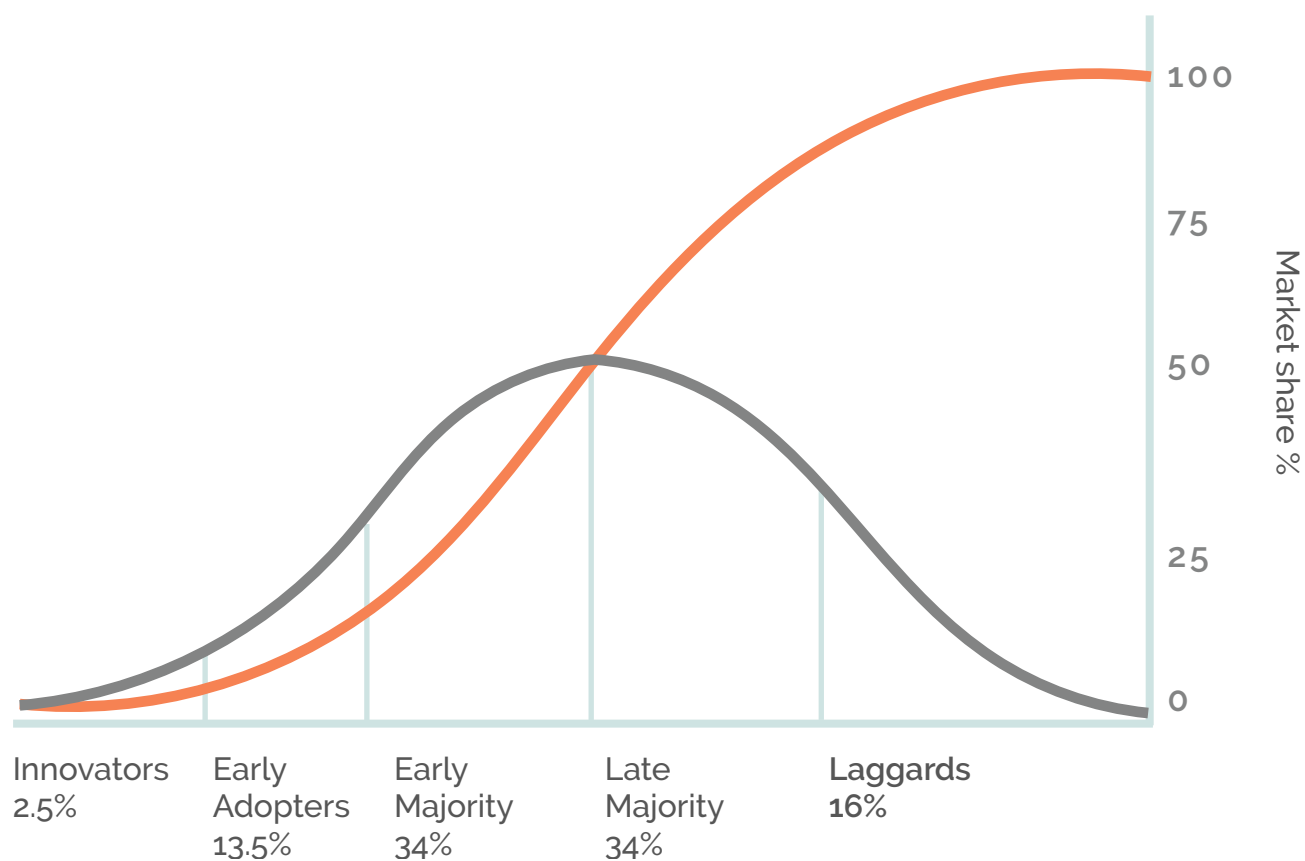
BUILDING ON THE CHANGE

More important than desiring the fruit of missional ministry is a core conviction that you can't do ministry another way.

At a certain point in the transition to missional communities, you have executed on the plan we have walked through. You've created urgency, formed a strategic team, crafted your vision, communicated the vision, empowered people to act, and celebrated some wins.

The temptation is to stop after those steps have been completed, and to be honest, the previous steps are the easy part. **Transition is not best measured by what you can do in a year, but if you're doing it 5 years later with greater effectiveness and participation.**

For a change to truly take hold in your church, you will need to build on the initial momentum that you build in the transition and form lasting change. Many people are familiar with the "**Diffusion of Innovations**" concept. In brief, you tend to reach a tipping point in an organization when the Innovators and Early Adopters of a group have implemented a key idea and practice. The organization will naturally adopt a "new normal" over time, with the Early Majority and Late Majority coming on board soon. The illustration below highlights the concept:



A STARK REALITY

It would seem that if you have executed the transition plan that we have talked about, by and large, you would have significantly won the Innovators, Early Adopters, and Early Majority, but in our experience that was not the case. While we had thought we were close to a tipping point after casting vision for two years in a row, we were sorely mistaken.

Because we focused primarily on casting vision and telling stories without building simple, reproducible, transferable practices and a **system of coaching and care**, we found that ~10% of our communities had taken the vision and run, whereas about 60% were desiring to attempt the vision but were either confused or frustrated at their attempt, and 30% simply went about with business as usual.

After the two years of the 10% who had adopted the vision, only a handful were really healthy. Several were tired and close to burnout, and some had even left the church because The Austin Stone "wasn't missional enough." The 60% were lacking relationship and growing increasingly confused and frustrated, and some were very suspicious of church leadership. The 30% who didn't make the change remained pretty happy, and some even had an "I told you so" outlook.

Without building on the change, the produce of casting a vision for transition will ultimately produce very little sustainable, long-term health. Don't fool yourself into thinking you've accomplished a transition!

TRAIN THE SAME THING REPEATEDLY OVER TIME

Perhaps the **biggest lesson we learned in building on the transition was to assume nothing**. Particularly, we could not assume that people had heard the vision, believed the vision, and were attempting to live the vision. With that conviction, we doggedly trained leaders and communities in the same theology, motivations, values, and practices from 2009 to 2011. Rather than continuously adding new material, we taught the same things over and over again, refusing to move along until we had seen a marked change in our missional communities and their effectiveness.

Over that 2-year span, we estimate that we trained almost 1600 people in our church community with basic training, and did not shift the practices we were cultivating or the content we were teaching during that time. You can see **the results of that effort here**. It wasn't until we had trained the vision on a practical level and reinforced the vision through training communities together that we actually hit a tipping point in the adoption of the vision.

In addition to repeating the same training, years three and four of transition were spent in focusing on missional community health rather than multiplication. Toward that end, we developed **training, coaching, assimilation** and **care** structures, as well as establishing a culture of **assessment**. Without an infrastructure, real change will likely not happen, and people will simply adopt new language and default to old behaviors.



CONTINUE IMPROVING AND ITERATING

Creating a healthy system doesn't just have the benefits of sustaining momentum, but also creates an environment where continuous learning can take place. When you have excellent communication and oversight, it affords you the opportunity to continuously improve upon the vision you originally created.

Each successful (and unsuccessful!) community provides an opportunity to build on what went right and identify what you can improve. It allows you to learn what practices that are useful and which practices can be discarded. It also allows you to innovate on the original vision and embed it more thoughtfully and precisely into new contexts.

Our different campuses at **The Austin Stone** all have a unified vision for ministry, but each group of people presents both unique challenges and opportunities to embed the vision for missional communities into different parts of our city. The insights we have gained from having multiple teams committed to the same vision in different contexts has allowed all the teams to continue learning and improving upon the vision!

AN EXHORTATION

As a final word, I encourage you to consider the process of transition as a five-year commitment, rather than a one-year experiment. I've been around several churches who have been excited about the idea of missional communities but have reverted back into other paradigms of ministry because they did not see the fruit of the change after a year.

More important than desiring the fruit of missional ministry is a core conviction that you can't do ministry another way. Don't start the transition if you're not willing to fight tooth and nail over several years!



INSTITUTIONALIZING THE CHANGE

If there is one thing I have learned in the transition to missional community, it is “practice the art of assuming nothing.” Never assume that you, your team, your leaders, or your church have it figured out!

To make any change stick, it should become part of the core of your organization. A transition to missional community is no different – it must become a foundational conviction about the identity of your church and the teams that lead her.

Many churches would say that they have a core conviction about the foundations of community and mission, but when you take a closer look, that value is aspirational rather than actual. So how do you can keep missional community really at the core of what you do?

EMBEDDING THE DNA IN ALL MINISTRIES

Part of what has made the transition at **The Austin Stone** sustainable is that missional communities are the foundation of all the ministries at the church, not just a silo in it. One of the strategies my team employed to help make this become a reality was patience. Rather than “forcing” every ministry to adopt our vision, we spent years serving and meeting the needs of those various ministries. **We believed that long-term change would come primarily through relational trust and unity in leadership, so we earned the opportunity to influence through serving.** We definitely took some short-term hits, but the long-term effect was worth it.

As of now, our campus pastors all consist of the team who originally developed the vision for missional community. Our international mobilization team uses the same form of missional community that we teach the general population of our church. Our **advanced training programs** require a commitment to an actual healthy missional community. Our worship teams live together in authentic missional communities. It's safe to say that the theology, philosophy, and practice of missional community is thoroughly embedded in everything we do!

If you want to institutionalize missional community, you'll need to take it slow, but continue to champion the value over and over again. Perhaps the most important piece of making the change stick is to continually cast vision for the foundational nature of missional communities with your senior team. More important than a full grasp of the strategy is that you capture the heart of your senior team...tell stories at any chance you get!

Lastly, as you are hiring new teammates, do your best to involve yourself in the process, regardless of the role. Always help people looking for staff, and keep a running list of people that have similar convictions for ministry. The more people that bleed missional community on your staff, the better!



TRAIN EVERYONE

Another critical piece of institutionalizing the DNA of missional community is to train everyone. I've seen so many churches trying to make the transition that only train leaders in the DNA they are after, but often the people in communities and the crowd only hear the vision cast from a stage.

One of the learning points for us was to train entire groups, and also welcome anyone to participate in our training. After we launch a new group, the next step we always communicate is to participate in **Basic Training** together. This has two primary benefits:

1. Everyone in the new community is hearing the vision, values and practices, and therefore you're creating more people who will hold the missional community accountable.
2. The leader of the new community can focus on shepherding people through the transition, and our teaching team can focus on inspiring people towards change. Functionally, the leader gets to be "good cop" whereas my team can be "bad cop."

Bottom line, the more people that know, love and apply your vision, the greater chance you will actually institutionalize it in people. At this point, we've had over 30% of our entire church body participate in basic training, and missional community is now the prevailing culture – it's weird if someone want to do something different!

USING HELPFUL TOOLS

I've mentioned before that **I'm not a fan of curriculum**, but we do use it for one particular purpose – to reinforce the DNA we are after in newly launching groups. After a group has participated in Basic Training, we then expect them to go through a multi-week curriculum that is like training wheels – it helps them put into practice the vision for missional community.

Whatever tools you use to help solidify a change, let me encourage you to focus on using one or two, rather than consistently adding new content. **Institutionalization is born from repeatedly acting upon the same vision over time, rather than reinterpreting the vision into new language.** The more people you have utilizing the same tools and same language, the more likely the vision is to be codified over time.

REINFORCING THE VISION OVER TIME

Lastly, to institutionalize the vision you'll occasionally need to revisit it from the pulpit. For us, this fall was exactly that – **we redefined missional community for everyone currently in one and invited many more people into the vision** who were only attending on Sundays. We went from 39% connected as a church to 61% connected to missional community, and everyone in the church is speaking the exact same language.

If there is one thing I have learned in the transition to missional community, it is "practice the art of assuming nothing." Never assume that you, your team, your leaders, or your church have it figured out!

