

Review: Launching Missional Communities: A Field Guide

I've finally read this book. Those who know me will wonder why. After all for many years I was the leader of a church plant that had the hallmarks of the "Missional Community" brand. But at that time I hadn't heard of the movement, although it was there amidst that heady mix of the 00's which sparked up buzzwords like Fresh Expressions, Emergent, Emerging, Reformation, and had voices that sounded like Graham Cray, Rob Bell, Mark Driscoll, John Piper, Brian McLaren, and a bunch of others who tapped the Gen X energy as it came of age: as we set our sights, gritted our teeth, and pushed on with our vocation, irrespective of whether the baton had been passed on or not.



And we learned some things. My wife and I certainly did. Although we never got to writing them down. We were (are?) too busy recovering.

But someone else did write them down. And they wrapped them up in a phrase called "Missional Communities" and blew away some of the chaff, and distilled the principles. And this handy little practical book is an excellent summation of it all.

The authors (Mike Breen & Alex Absalom) are clearly trying to avoid our natural tendency to fad-ism. This is the danger of "Missional Communities" – that it becomes a program that is a hit in a few places, helpful in others, and fades quickly away everywhere. Normally the only way to avoid this is steer away from the "how" and stick to articulating the principles. But this is a "field guide" – they have to do both without

collapsing the organic heart into some form of methodology. They do a good, but imperfect, job at this.

They do a very good job at articulating some of the **principles** of missional communities. This is the stuff that stirs my heart.

- The term “Missional Community” encapsulates “mid-sized communities, led by laity, [which] are ‘lightweight and low maintenance’, and most often gather formally and informally numerous times a month in the groups’ missional context.” (p18, see also p 124). More importantly, it is this form of organic community that is most readily effective at growing the kingdom, particularly in the Western World. It is *small enough care, large enough to dare*.
- MC’s are organic and seek to tap into a “welling up” of a mutual passion. But they remain deliberate, and holistically led. They do this within and through a culture of *discipleship*. This is the muscles of church leadership that is often ignored in favour of the administrative “bones” – leaving heavy carcasses that cannot move. The “huddle” model of discipleship (I hate the term, but like the concept) incorporates both horizontal (peer) and vertical forms of discipleship. The culture of “low control, high accountability” is *essential*, particularly in church systems which have become dominated by the line-management corporate-space idols of the last century. Even the corporate sector is moving away from this, and the church remains stuck. The authors quote from a Harvard Business Review article:

‘We have found that contrary to what many CEOs assume, leadership is not really about delegating tasks and monitoring results; it is about imbuing the entire workforce with a sense of responsibility for the business.’ They [the HBR authors] call this mutualism, whereby staff are measured against qualitative values such as trust, responsibility, and innovation. (p 55)

- MC's both express and encourage a cultural shift from static programs to dynamic mission. Programs, demographics, models, professionalism, and decision-making processes remain important. But such things become self-referential and stultifying. Enlivening happens, rather, in transitioning processes, discernment, on-the-ground context awareness, passion and discipleship (see p26). Such enlivening is naturally holistic and therefore naturally breaks down the secular/sacred divide and other curses of the Western church.
- MC's do not replace the "wider" church but are a natural structure within it, and a deliberative structure that can be embraced. It embraces a "space" (p 42ff) that has, historically, been absent from the church – that of the size of an "extended family." The church has operated in the "public space," and since the advent of small group ministry, the "personal space" – it thus expresses "corporate" and "individual." But it has ignored the "social space" – what Breen and Absalom call the *oikos* (household – p33) space – the "community" space which naturally connotes a longing for "belonging" in the Western world.
- The *outward* movement of MC's relies on discernment and discipleship before it relies on strategy and management. Absalom and Breen make reference to "Persons of Peace" (p 38) as the hub of their mission dynamic. This relies on the Holy Spirit to bring about the natural connection points where the gospel will find traction. MC leaders are disciplined as they are encouraged to exercise this discernment. It is naturally "organic" and:

the church grows best through natural organic relationships, rather than through institutional structures. The invigorating part of the Person of Peace strategy is that it stops mission being yet another thing to cram into our busy

lives. (p 39)

There are many chunks of wisdom throughout the book. Many of these articulate some of the things that have been unearthed in my own practical experience. e.g. The “out” of mission builds community and grows the church – “There is nothing like shared battle stories (and battle scars!) to enhance a community’s sense of togetherness, so the very action of going out in mission strengthens the group’s life with one another” (p 32). The practicalities articulated in the latter are the same – how to exercise a teaching ministry in such a context, the role of children at the missional front, venues for meeting, smaller groups within the larger group, the manner of exercising pastoral and practical care: these are questions that we have had to wrestle with over the years and have arrived at similar conclusions.

While many of the points in the book were articulations that expressed something I already knew (even if I hadn’t articulated it yet), I was still extended. The chapter on “spaces” (p42) has some good things to explore for teasing through what the role of the “Sunday” church is and how the organic messiness of MC’s can still be made coherent and coordinated. Breen and Absalom talk about “minster” models and I particularly appreciate the recognition of the celebratory (worship) and commissioning/apostolic role of the centre.

There are parts of the book that don’t resonate with me. I am not convinced by their launch strategy of pilot MC followed by “launch Sunday” and the implied wholesale of converting an entire church to participation in MC’s. Perhaps the quote from Machiavelli (p 78) warned me off! For me their launch strategy cuts across the “welling up” “organic” nature that is the life of the whole thing. I think it would be better to start with discipleship – that is, begin by discipling the leaders of “MC” size groups that already exist, or of leaders

that have a passion for an outward mission that has some legs, and encourage, train and release them. This “infection” method of cultural change is in my experience much more effective, reduces unnecessary risk of disillusionment, and avoids the fad-ism.

Similarly, the “Growing your MC” section (p109) seems to speak more to the tools of the trade than to the heart of the matter. The variation of the Engel’s scale that is employed leans more towards those on the fringe (and the People of Peace) being treated as targets in themselves, rather than objects of genuine love. Like other tools (e.g. Bolt’s *Mission-Minded*) there is no natural space for worship and communal adoration and runs the risk of making the mission of the Missional Community overly-utilitarian in nature.

The whole thing still excites me though. This vision of how the church can be still gets a “Yes and Amen” from my slightly less youthful lungs. And the various forms of ecclesial inertia that frustrate this vision now sadden me more than frustrate me. The long goodbye of the non-missional church is almost upon us. We will grieve and bury our parents, and help to launch our children. And Christ will be known in our season.