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An Examination of Three Models of Missional Communities for Sharing the Gospel with Muslims in the United States

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Abstract

Missional communities are small groups within a local church that serve those outside the church with the aim of sharing the gospel, perhaps even providing them the possibility of joining the group. Missional communities have been used effectively by local churches in reaching the surrounding community or a specific group of people. This article examines three different models of missional communities, discussing the strengths and challenges associated with each one. Based on these observations, along with observations on the evangelical Christian and Muslim communities in the United States, three recommendations are presented for helping missional communities effectively share the gospel with a local Muslim community.

Three Models of Missional Communities

Justin Smith offers a concise definition of a missional community as “an expression of the church that seeks to serve the communities around them” (Smith, 2013, p.190). While this definition can be applied to both whole congregations as well as smaller groups within a congregation, for our

purposes we will be focusing on missional communities as small groups within a local church who serve those outside the church with the aim of sharing the gospel with them or having them join the group.

To gain a better understanding of missional communities, we will examine the view of three authors and practitioners: Scott Boren (2010), Mike Breen (2013), and Reggie McNeal (2011). We will examine how these authors define missional communities, what they believe the proper size to be, and how they should be structured.

Scott Boren

Scott Boren (2010) describes missional communities as small groups of people who are “committed to live in community with one another in everyday life, and [who have] a call to minister together outside of official meetings” (p.17). These are groups that “experience community for the sake of participating in God’s redemption of creation” (2010, p.23).

Boren sharpens this definition by identifying three topics that shape missional communities. First, is the realization that Western Christians live in a time where they need to view themselves as missionaries in their own countries. Second, Christians need to ask “what it means to be the church and how the people of God should be a sign, witness, and foretaste of God’s dream for the world” (Boren, 2010, p. 25). Third, they need to discuss the broad implications of the gospel and how God is at work in the world, enabling them to discern how God’s Spirit is at work and to “see how small groups can be more than a support system for church as we know it or as a method for resurrecting a dying church system” (Boren, 2010, p.25). Such groups will help God’s people to understand how to join God in what he is already doing by, for example, helping with refugee resettlement or serving the surrounding community alongside local religious leaders.

This last point emphasizes why it is important for those participating in a missional community to understand how their group fits into “the specific location and culture of a neighborhood” (Boren 2010, p.64). Boren argues that this is how foreign missionaries conduct their ministry when they enter a new culture, seeking to discover how to best live out their ministry calling in that context. They begin by listening to the local people’s concerns and praying for them; through this, “the Good News of Jesus rises up and becomes real in specific situations” (Boren, 2010, p.131). Since Western Christians need to view themselves as missionaries to their own culture, they must also practice how to contextualize their ministry in similar ways. Boren urges that this best happens in a community. It is not simply for “individuals who feel called to ‘reach people for Christ’” (Boren, 2010, p.132).

For a missional community to be successful, it must have a presence in a neighborhood and its members must interact with people in such a way that they know the members of the missional community care for them. Christians

should follow Jesus' example of ministering locally in a specific place (Boren, 2010). Serving a specific neighborhood will help those in the missional community get to know the people in the community on a personal level, enabling them to share the gospel in a way that feels authentic. Such a presence will cause the missional community to be seen "as people who live in this world and as people who have a God who can do something about what is going on in this world" (Boren, 2010, p.135).

Boren's vision for a missional community is that its members will frequently interact with their neighbors by sharing their joys and struggles in life so that their neighbors will grow to trust them. This will allow non-Christian neighbors to see how the gospel changes lives and gives "them access to not only the God who can change their lives but also a community that can embrace them and walk with them through their life situations" (Boren, 2010, p.161). In these missional communities, both believers and non-believers are invited by the group to take steps towards Jesus and to embrace him and his kingdom.

Mike Breen

Central to Mike Breen's (2013) definition of a missional community is the New Testament word *oikos*, the Greek word for "household." In the New Testament context, households were "essentially extended families who functioned together with a common purpose" and that "discipleship and mission always centered around and flourished in the *oikos*" (Breen, 2013, loc. 106). His definition of a missional community is an *oikos* formed by Christians, "an extended family on mission where everyone contributes and everyone is supported" (Breen, 2013, loc. 119).

Breen believes that there are four foundational principles for missional communities. First, they are to be communities for the purpose of disciple making. He defines a disciple as someone who learns to trust and follow Jesus in every area of life, grows in Christlike character, and becomes more competent in ministry (Breen 2013, loc. 253). In a missional community, leaders intentionally train disciples who will multiply themselves by training more disciples. Breen states "we are called to participate in the advance of the Kingdom of God by making disciples who become leaders and multiply to make more disciples" (Breen, 2013, loc. 329-341).

Breen's second foundational principle is that missional communities are to be communities focused on sharing the good news. The group is to embody and proclaim the gospel. Here the missional community is to "tell the whole story of the good news of Jesus Christ" in both words and actions (Breen, 2013, loc. 369).

The third principle flows out of the second: The missional community is directed towards those considered to be Persons of Peace. In Luke 10:1-16, the Person of Peace was someone who welcomed Jesus' disciples "into his or her home, was open to the message they were bringing, and served them" (Breen,

2013, loc. 516). Just as the disciples were to seek out this type of person who was open to them and their message, so should Christians today who are trying to reach a particular neighborhood or relational network, such as another religious community. Identifying people who may be Persons of Peace is important because “they are people in whom God has already been working, preparing their hearts for the good news of Jesus” (Breen, 2013, loc. 526).

Breen’s (2013) fourth principle is that missional communities are to cultivate both the organized and organic elements of community. These elements include both the organized activities of a missional community as well as the more informal activities and events in life. The organic element could include events like hosting a group for dinner or spontaneous activities like a pick-up basketball game. Breen warns that there are two equal and opposite errors groups can make. “Let us state it as strongly as possible: If your missional community is doing only organized events, it will fail. If your missional community is committed only to the organic ‘hanging out’ together, it will fail” (Breen, 2013, loc. 631). It is necessary to discover the right balance for each missional community so that “they become places where people experience being an extended family on mission” (Breen, 2013, loc. 619-31).

While Breen’s (2013) vision for a missional community has much in common with Boren’s (2010), his view of evangelism and discipleship seems to be more intentional than Boren’s. Whereas Boren (2010) appears leery of the goal of growth in the missional community, Breen (2013) makes no apology that this is to be the aim of the group. He writes, “Our commission is to compassionately reach out to those around us, invite them to join us in community, share the story of the gospel, make disciples, and gather them into families to follow Jesus together. That’s really what starting a missional community is all about” (Breen, 2013, loc. 119). These missional communities are to intentionally and compassionately serve a specific group of people and actively invite them to follow Christ.

Breen (2013) agrees with Boren (2010) that missional communities are to adapt to the specific context in which they are ministering. Yet, Breen (2013) expands the types of audience which can be the focus of missional communities. While Boren (2010) encourages missional communities to impact a specific neighborhood, Breen (2013) adds that they can also impact a network (Breen 2013, loc. 144). So, Breen’s (2013) model can be employed to reach out to a specific religious group within the neighborhood, such as the Muslim community, a group often overlooked when Christians think about local outreach.

Reggie McNeal

Soma is a network of missional communities in the Seattle area, described by Reggie McNeal (2011) in *Missional Communities: The Rise of the Post Congregational Church*. Soma defines a missional community as “a

committed core of believers (family) who live out the mission together (missionaries) in a specific area or to a particular people group by demonstrating the gospel in tangible forms (servants) and declaring the gospel to others—both those who believe it and those who are being exposed to it (learners)” (McNeal, 2011, loc. 1338).

Members of a Soma missional community must have “a proper grasp of the gospel, along with its implications for a believer’s identity in Christ and how the gospel can be lived out in basic life rhythms” (McNeal, 2011, loc. 1346). Thus for Soma, their understanding of the gospel has two elements: theological and missional. The theological side is understanding that the gospel is God’s power to save sinners through the redemptive work of Christ. The missional side flows out of the theological as believers grasp the gospel as a story of redemption for the whole world. “This takes place as the disciples of Jesus make other disciples who live out their role as agents of renewal in all areas of culture—the arts, business, politics, families, education—all domains of human activity” (McNeal, 2011, loc. 1361).

Participants in Soma’s missional communities have four primary identities: family members, missionaries, servants, and learners. As family members, they care for one another as followers of Christ. As missionaries, they are sent out by God into the world “to live in such a way that people can see and experience what God is truly like” (McNeal, 2011, loc. 1370). As servants, they simply seek to “serve others as a way of life,” and as learners, they take “responsibility for [their] own development and that of others” (McNeal, 2011, loc. 1370-78).

Soma’s (McNeal, 2011) conception of a missional community is similar to Boren’s (2010) and Breen’s (2013), especially concerning a missionary emphasis and service to those whom they seek to reach. However, McNeal’s Soma communities place a greater emphasis on the theological implications of the gospel for their members. This is to foster believers’ growth by developing a “strong identity of being the people of God, not just as a result of doing a bunch of church programming” (McNeal, 2011, loc. 1331).

Size of a Missional Community

There is considerable variation among these authors concerning the size of a missional community. Boren (2010, p. 103) believes that a group should consist of 5-12 people who are willing to share life together and have a sense of belonging. McNeal’s (2011, loc. 1448) Soma communities are slightly larger ranging, from 8 to 20, with 12 to 14 members being typical.

Breen (2013) thinks that a missional community needs to be much larger with 20 to 40 people. While he would allow for a group to be 12 to 15, he holds that the 20 to 40 size is ideal. He supports this size stating missional communities need to be “small enough to care but also big enough to dare” (loc. 156). This means the group should be small enough for everyone to be cared for

and to contribute, but large enough to carry out the group's mission. The groups should also be large enough that people feel comfortable visiting and observing the group without having to make a commitment.

A final advantage to a missional community with 20 to 40 members is that the group can multiply easily. According to Breen (2013), smaller groups are more intimate, making it more difficult to divide because people do not want to leave the close relationships they have built.

Breen (2013) is critical of the smaller-sized groups suggested by Boren (2010) and the Soma communities for two main reasons. First, a smaller group lacks the semi-autonomous nature of a mid-sized one. This makes it more difficult to add people who just want to visit the group as observers (Breen 2013, loc. 157). Second, a group with fewer than 15 adults usually become inwardly focused. This reduces the multiplying potential of the missional community. Due to these factors, Breen insists that "size does matter in missional communities" (Breen 2013, loc. 156).

Structure of a Missional Community

Scott Boren

Boren's (2010) missional communities are structured around three basic rhythms: Missional Communion, Missional Relating, and Missional Engagement. Missional Communion concerns how people in the group relate to God: worshipping, listening to God through Scripture, praying together, and sharing communion which he calls "the Jesus meal." Boren believes that relating to God "is basic and foundational to anything we do missionally" (2010, p. 70).

Missional Relating concerns how the members of the missional community relate to each other. Appealing to John 13:34-35 where Jesus tells his followers that the world will know that they are his disciples if they love one another, Boren comments "The way we relate to one another is as important to our missional way of being in the world as anything else" (Boren 2010, p. 101). Through this rhythm, the missional community creates a safe atmosphere, resolves conflict, and builds one another up.

Boren (2010) cautions against jumping to the final rhythm, Missional Engagement, without previously developing the first two rhythms. Many people will want to begin with this third rhythm because it is "where the action is" (Boren 2010, p. 131). However, "those who jump into this rhythm without considering how the first two rhythms shape our lives as a people who are distinctively God's soon find that Missional Engagement loses its sustaining power" (Boren 2010, p. 131). Therefore, he encourages those who want to launch a missional community to consider how "the three rhythms reinforce one another for Missional Engagement around us" (Boren 2010, p. 131).

After this warning, he defines Missional Engagement as "doing Missional Communion and Missional Relating before those in the neighborhood" (Boren

2010, p. 134), or practicing the first two rhythms in full view of those in the surrounding community. This is a more natural way to do evangelism than program-based evangelism.

While he mentions several ways to practice Missional Engagement, Boren (2010) emphasizes practicing hospitality. He points out that the word hospitality, in *koine* Greek, simply means the love of strangers. It is through this practice that those in the missional community create space for those who are “different or unknown” (Boren 2010, p. 149).

He highlights three concrete aspects of hospitality. First is the welcome and conversation that others experience in our homes. Second, hospitality revolves around how we eat food and connect spiritually. Third, it is important to refrain from trying to convert someone because hospitality receives people as they are. However, this does not mean that we jettison or hide our beliefs, but we introduce our guests to the gospel while conversing with them (Boren 2010, p. 151-53). In many Muslim cultures, hospitality is a cherished value and can be especially effective when interacting with Muslims.

Mike Breen

Mike Breen outlines five characteristics of a missional community’s structure. The first concerns the size of the group already discussed. The second characteristic is the development of a clear vision of their mission. This vision is to be “focused on sharing the good news of Jesus and making disciples among the people of a specific neighborhood or network of relationships” (Breen 2013, loc. 169-181). It is this vision that draws people into the missional community and provides the motivation to keep the group moving.

Lightweight/low-Maintenance is the third characteristic of Breen’s missional community model. The emphasis here is on making the group a lifestyle rather than a set of programs or events to run. The goal is to set up sustainable rhythms “by missionally focusing the activities we are already involved in, rather than adding more events and extra commitments to the calendar” (Breen 2013, loc. 194). In other words, it is using the activities that people in the group are already doing for missional purposes.

The leader’s accountability to a central church is the fourth characteristic of Breen’s (2013) missional community. While the church will have low control over the group, the accountability of the leader will be high. Low control over the group is necessary to ensure that the leader has the freedom to act according to the needs and opportunities that develop. But it is through high accountability to the central church that the leader is equipped and supported to lead the group. This accountability may take the form of a regular meeting with a church leader to review the missional community’s vision and activities, with the church leader providing the necessary encouragement and counsel.

The final characteristic of Breen’s (2013) missional community is an up/in/out rhythm. Up focuses on community members’ relationship with

God. In focuses on the relationships within the community. Out focuses on outreach to the community. The community's vision for mission, along with this threefold rhythm, allows a missional community, to be "an extended family on mission together" (Breen, 2013, loc. 218).

Reggie McNeal

Soma communities are structured around six "cultural rhythms" (McNeal, 2011, loc. 1388). The first is that they are story-formed. This means that these missional communities "Understand, experience, and intersect with God's story and others'" (McNeal, 2011, loc. 1388). Leaders instill this rhythm into the group at the beginning of each year (typically after a break) by going through discipleship material called the Story-Formed Way. This curriculum walks the community through the basics of the Gospel message and the core doctrines of Christianity. It is available online as a free download (<https://saturatetheworld.com/resource/story-formed-way/>).

Next, these Missional communities take time to listen to God "both 'backward' and 'forward'" (McNeal, 2011, loc. 1402-3). This involves listening to God in Scripture, the 'backward' element, while at the same time listening to the Holy Spirit through prayer for guidance, the 'forward' element.

Celebration of the blessings that God has bestowed is the third rhythm. These are weekly gatherings at both the missional community-level and the larger congregational-level. The larger congregational meetings are what Soma calls Expressions, where a number of groups gather together. The purpose of these gatherings "is to celebrate all that God is doing in and among the people of the missional community" (McNeal, 2011, loc. 1406).

The fourth rhythm is intentionally blessing others. This is focused on the group the missional community has chosen to serve and where they will seek to make disciples of Jesus.

Eating meals with others constitutes the fifth rhythm. Group members are accountable to each other for having meals with those outside the missional community whom they are trying to reach. Related to this is the sixth rhythm of taking "time to rest, play, create, and restore beauty in ways that reflect God to others" (McNeal, 2011, loc. 1421-28). This includes celebrating with those inside and outside the group, as well as looking for "ways to add beauty to their surroundings, whether in beautification projects or art projects in local neighborhoods" (McNeal, 2011, loc. 1429-31).

While all three of these models seek a balance between organization and flexibility, it appears that Boren (2010) emphasizes flexibility the most concerning the structure of missional communities. Both Breen (2013) and the Soma communities (McNeal, 2011) emphasize a more organized structure, providing specific guidelines for a missional community. Those who prefer a little more freedom and flexibility will favor Boren's model, whereas those looking for more structure will gravitate towards Breen and Soma when

launching a group.

The Muslim Community in the United States and Christian Attitudes Towards Them

Now that we have discussed the nature of missional communities, we will look at the Muslim community in the United States and Christians' attitudes towards Muslims. This will lead to specific recommendations for how missional communities can influence a local Muslim community with the gospel.

According to the Pew Forum, 3.45 million Muslims call the United States their home (Pew Forum, 2017). This is a diverse group of people including both immigrants from throughout the world and natural-born U.S. citizens. A Pew researcher has projected that "by 2040, Muslims will replace Jews as the nation's second-largest religious group after Christians. And by 2050, the U.S. Muslim population is projected to reach 8.1 million, or 2.1% of the nation's total population — nearly twice the share of today" (Mohamed, 2018).

Yet reports of evangelical Christian attitudes towards Muslims in the U.S., such as "Most White Evangelicals Don't Think Muslims Belong in America" (Shellnut, 2017), paint a discouraging picture. A LifeWay Research study of evangelical pastors' attitudes towards Islam indicated that half the respondents characterized Islam as spiritually evil, dangerous, and promoting violence (Green 2015). For many evangelicals, mistrust of Muslims is high even before any relationship begins.

If we are going to move past these obstacles to better share the gospel with Muslims, then we need to think deeply about our view of other religions and Islam more specifically. Harold Netland (2001) provides evangelicals with two conditions for formulating a theology of other religions. First, it must be based on Scripture and consistent with historic, orthodox Christianity. Second, it must be accurate in its description of other religious traditions (Netland, 2001, p. 313). He argues that adherents of other religions are created in God's image and have access to general revelation. Thus these religious others will know some truth about God and do some things that are morally commendable (Rom. 1-2). Yet because of human sinfulness (Matt. 23:1-36) and the influence of Satan and his demons (2 Cor. 4:4), adherents of other religions cannot know the one true God through practicing their faith, but only through God's self-revelation in Scripture (Netland, 2001, p. 331-36).

Encouraging Christians to live faithfully in the multi-faith context of North America, Ed Stetzer offers four principles. The first is to let each religion speak for itself. This is similar to Netland's concern for accurate descriptions of others' belief systems. It is important for Christians to listen to adherents of other faiths in order to "learn what people actually believe" (Stetzer, 2018, p. 11).

Second, Stetzer (2018) instructs Christians to talk with and about individuals without assuming that religions are monolithic belief systems. This will help them to avoid stereotyping everyone of a particular religion

based on the actions of a few (Stetzer, 2018, p. 11).

Third, Christians should respect the beliefs of people of other religions without distorting them, just as we would want them to respect and accurately describe Christian beliefs. Stetzer comments, “It is simply unfair and unchristian to sit by and allow or actively take part in lying about those of another religion” (2018, p. 13).

Finally, people must be granted the freedom to make their own decisions concerning what they believe. Here Christians must realize that they cannot compel others to believe a certain way and that others have the right to choose their own path regardless of the consequences. This attitude is seen in Jesus when he forbade his disciples to use force after they were rejected in a Samaritan village (Luke 9:54-55; Stetzer, 2018, p. 15).

Amit Bhatia (2015) agrees with Netland’s criteria and would find much in common with Stetzer’s four commitments as he focuses specifically on Islam. He suggests that Islam’s focus on monotheism is something that evangelicals can commend, especially its emphasis on submission to God and morality. In line with Stetzer’s admonition to respect the beliefs of others, Bhatia cautions against speaking disrespectfully of the Qur’an and Muhammad due to the high reverence Muslims have for them. Similar to Netland’s idea that other religions contain some truth, Bhatia encourages evangelicals to affirm truths in Islam that agree with the Bible and to use them as “connecting points to engage Muslims” (Bhatia, 2015, p. 132). Finally, he advises evangelicals to be informed of the political issues in the Muslim world, especially discussions concerning violence and terrorism, paying attention to the complexity of these issues (Bhatia, 2015, p. 132-34).

Bhatia (2015) also offers some helpful suggestions as to how Christians should approach Muslims. He argues that Christians should be aware of their own biases due to the violence committed by Islamic radicals, as well as recognize that not all Muslims support such violence. He also holds that Christians should develop a healthy appreciation for Islamic culture and treat Muslims by the Golden Rule as we would want to be treated (Bhatia, 2015, p. 134). The importance of the Golden Rule is affirmed by Stetzer and is also emphasized by David Gustafson, Chair of Mission and Evangelism at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He writes, “The Golden Rule provides clarity for how we should treat religious others, including how we engage in witness, share the gospel, and practice Christian apologetics” (Gustafson, 2019, p. 170).

By anchoring themselves in Scripture and historic, orthodox Christian theology, as Netland (2001) encourages, Christians can engage members of other religions with confidence. Stetzer’s (2018) four principles provide practical guidelines for navigating relationships with those from a different religious background. Bhatia (2015) shows how to interact with Muslims specifically and even how to start conversations about religion. Using the Golden Rule as a guide, we can pursue relationships with Muslims,

communicating the compassion of Christ.

Interacting with Muslims in North America through Missional Communities

Since we have addressed Christians' attitudes towards Muslims and how they should interact with them, we will now address how Christians in a missional community can reach out to and serve Muslims near them.

Richard Kronk and colleagues (2017), in conjunction with Tyndale Intercultural Ministry (TIM) Center at Tyndale University College and Seminary in Toronto, Canada, conducted a study of Christians who minister among Muslims in North America and found that one of the top three reasons for Muslims coming to Christ was an experience with a local evangelical church. Missional communities, as part of local congregations, can certainly expect to play a significant role in seeing Muslims become disciples of Christ. Developing a clear mission vision, practicing hospitality, and serving the Muslim community will enable a missional community to effectively share the gospel with Muslims in the United States.

A Clear Mission Vision

A missional community focusing on a particular group of people needs a clear mission vision (Breen, 2013). Clarity of vision will assist the missional community to stay focused on interacting with Muslims and can be used to attract others in the church who also have a desire to reach Muslims.

Some people in a local church will encounter Muslims at work and possibly in their neighborhood, but only about 22% of U.S. evangelicals interact frequently with Muslims (Foundation for Ethnic Understanding 2019) and less than half that number would say they have a close friend who is Muslim (Mogahed and Mahmood 2019, p. 21). Similarly, it is likely many Muslims do not have close friends outside of their own community. Moreover, Christians may have fears to overcome or a lack of knowledge of how to reach out to them. Therefore, a local Muslim community is what Breen (2013) would call "a 'crevice' of society where a gospel presence is lacking." He encourages Christians to specifically focus on such communities so that the principal growth of the missional community will come from those who have had the least exposure to the Gospel.

Members of a missional community with a focus on reaching Muslims need training on effectively living out the gospel in a local Muslim community (Urton, 2021). This will require a curriculum like *Journey to Jesus: Building Christ-centered Friendships with Muslims* (Oksnevad and Urton, 2014) or *Bridges: Christians Connecting with Muslims* (Masri, 2008) to encourage interacting with Muslims with confidence. Soma's Story-Formed Way material would also be valuable because it teaches Christians how to share the entire narrative of Scripture with their Muslim friends. The vast majority of Muslims

do not have an understanding of Scripture as the story of God's redemption, so this is an effective way of communicating many aspects of the gospel.

Hospitality

Hospitality will prove valuable for members of a missional community as they develop relationships with Muslims. In most Muslim cultures hospitality is highly valued. Thabiti Anyabwile writes, "Muslims, who typically practice hospitality on a regular basis, value such actions by others. When we show hospitality, we welcome them into our lives" (Anyabwile, 2010, p. 123).

While it is important that Christians open their homes to Muslims, sharing their faith and lives with them, it is equally important that Christians receive the hospitality that Muslims extend to them. In doing so, Christians demonstrate their appreciation of Islamic culture, their generosity and hospitality, and thereby honor their Muslim neighbors (Bhatia, 2015).

Joshua Jipp (2017), associate professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, also argues that Christians need to receive the hospitality of people of other religions, based on the example of the apostle Paul where he, along with the sailors shipwrecked with him, received it from the Maltese in Acts 28. When befriending Muslims, this can be done by accepting an invitation to an *Iftar* (the breaking of the fast dinner during Ramadan) or any other offer of hospitality extended by a Muslim host. Jipp hopes that in both giving and receiving hospitality from others, Christians will:

engage in personal encounters where they can both share their own stories and listen to the stories and experiences of non-Christian neighbors. This hospitable openness can perhaps best take place in one another's homes where hospitable interaction with the religious other can entail offering clear and sensitive explanations of one's own faith commitments and religious practices (2017, p. 115).

Both Boren (2010) and Jipp (2017) believe that practicing hospitality should lead to conversations where Christians can both share their faith and learn about the faith of others. Certainly, listening to and learning from Muslim neighbors is needed when practicing hospitality, but it is also important for believers to be intentional about introducing their faith to Muslims. Unlike many Westerners, Muslims respect a deep commitment to religion and find it refreshing when they see it, especially when living in a secular culture. As one Muslim friend stated after spending an evening in our home, "I didn't know there were people like you here in America." He had never met Christians who took their faith seriously and verbalized it.

Expressing one's faith does not need to take the form of a gospel presentation with an invitation to receive Christ, but rather it can be communicated in gracious ways that fit with the flow of the time together. For

example, many Muslims, both first and second generation, do not know much about Christian holidays. They are surrounded by holiday décor every Easter and Christmas but have no idea what the symbols mean. Yet many are curious about their meaning, seeing them displayed so prominently every holiday season. Thus, explaining the meaning of an Advent calendar, the significance of biblically themed ornaments, or the relationship between Passover and Easter can introduce them to elements of the Christian faith and potentially spark deeper conversations about the gospel.

All these aspects of hospitality can be included in the rhythm of a missional community by inviting Muslim guests to a potluck or picnic. As Anyabwile observes “Maybe the best way for us Christians to build friendships with Muslim neighbors the Lord has brought to our doorsteps is to host them in our homes. We may reach the world for Christ by simply reaching across our picket fences or crossing the street and then inviting them into our dining and family rooms” (2010, p. 124).

Community Service Projects

Lesslie Newbigin believed that Christians should be “eager to cooperate with people of all faiths and ideologies in all projects which are in line with the Christian’s understanding of God’s purpose in history” (1989, loc. 3390). In other words, Christians should be willing to work with people of other faiths on issues and projects that line up with God’s purposes for the community. This is similar to Soma’s rhythm of restoring beauty in a way that reflects God to others (McNeal 2011, loc. 1429-31). Therefore, believers involved in a missional community can look for ways to organize and participate in joint-service projects alongside their Muslim friends.

A joint Muslim-Christian service effort should ask Boren’s (2010) questions for determining the particular needs of a community and deciding where to serve. These questions include asking about the community’s greatest assets, what people like about living or working in the community, what needs to change in the community, and the greatest need in the community (Boren 2010, p. 148-49). This could be done in conjunction with the leadership of a local mosque to encourage participation in and ownership of a joint project.

Asking such questions can uncover needs such as school children requiring tutors, elderly people hoping for yard work, or food banks lacking labor. Discussing needs can lead to projects such as painting a run-down building or planting trees in a local park. Given the Muslim values of service and community improvement, these are all projects that Christians and Muslims could work on together.

During these service projects, members of the missional community can look for opportunities to share bits of information about who Christ is and what he has done in their lives. Newbigin (1989) believed that this is where true dialogue begins as we serve with others while discussing the real issues of

a community. He writes “the essential contribution of the Christian to the dialogue will simply be the telling of the story, the story of Jesus, the story of the Bible” (Newbiggin, 1989, loc. 3415).

Conclusion

A missional community with a clear vision to reach Muslims can employ these suggestions from the inception of the group. Yet they must also realize that the journey ahead will be a long and challenging one. Gustafson offers this exhortation when working with people of other religions, “We must start where religiously diverse people are in their understandings of God, the Bible, and the gospel of Jesus Christ. This requires a long journey for some people to come to faith in Jesus Christ. We must walk patiently with them step-by-step, taking time to explain the gospel in words and to demonstrate its truth in deeds” (Gustafson, 2019, p. 151). This is especially true with members of a local Muslim community. Perhaps a focused and committed missional community can eventually, after years of service, see their Muslim neighbors, created in God’s image, become disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. Hopefully, these disciples, with a similar focus and support structure, can be used by God to start a movement within their own people by reproducing their own missional communities.

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