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## City-Reaching: The Dominant Church Paradigm of the Next Decade

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**City-Reaching: The Dominant Church  
Paradigm of the Next Decade**

**Jack Dennison**

The purpose of this gathering is to create a forum for Church Growth theorists and practitioners to evaluate current trends, explore the implications of ongoing research, and to become familiar with the latest innovations in the field. It is my purpose to introduce one of those innovations; one that I am convinced will become the dominant paradigm of the Church in the next decade. It is the innovation of city-reaching.



One city-reaching practitioner recently suggested that “city-

reaching is the most significant innovation of the Church in this decade and will become the predominant paradigm of the next decade." City-reaching is something new and we are unfamiliar with it. The paradigm it suggests enables us to think about old things in new ways, and I believe it represents the normal and natural way the Church will minister in the future.

As a nomenclature "city-reaching" is increasingly becoming a technical term describing a set of theological, theoretical and practical assumptions and factors.

By city-reaching, I mean the ongoing process of mobilizing the whole Body of Christ in a city to strategically focus all of its resources on reaching the whole city with the whole Gospel. City-reaching is a Great Commission commitment and brings to bear all of the theory, practice, research, and delivery systems of Church Growth in a dynamic synergy, harnessing and focusing the full capabilities and resources of the Church on reaching the city.

But what do we mean by the Great Commission and what must we do to be obedient to this command? Matthew 28:18-20 is perhaps, the most beloved passage in the Bible for a gathering such as ours. It is our mandate; it is what we have committed our lives to; it gives meaning and direction to our ministry efforts. But what does it mean to "make disciples of all *ta ethna*" and how are we to do this?

It is interesting to recognize that God has given us His most exacting orders for the ministry of the Church worldwide, but He has withheld the plans to do it.

What does it mean to make disciples of all nations? This is an issue that has been debated by theologians and practitioners for 2,000 years, and always with the same conclusion, "we don't know." God has told us what He wants accomplished, but not how to do it.

This shouldn't be too surprising since this seems to be typical of God's ways. I could show how God has done this time and again in the life of such Biblical characters as Moses, Joshua, Nehemiah, and the Apostle Paul, to name just a few. So then, how do we walk in obedience regarding this command?

The answer is found in asking, "What did Jesus do, and what would He do if He were alive in the world today?" Since the Church is the continuation of the incarnation of Christ, we should do what He did and what He would do.

Following the Sermon on the Mount of chapters 5-7, the Apostle Matthew takes the next two chapters to record one miracle of our Lord after another. He raised the dead, cast out demons, and healed "all the sick," Matthew said. He concludes chapter 9 with these words, "Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness." Why? "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

The historian Josephus tells us there were 208 "towns and villages" in the time of Christ. Jesus went to every one of them, which in itself suggests a systematic approach to his task. Motivated by his deep love and compassion for people, he met them at the deepest point of their lives, healed their hurts, and shared his message of hope and salvation. That is what the Church is to do!

## ***The Great Commission*** ***What Is It? How Is It Measured?***

*The Church's presence  
in society*

*Saturation of the city by  
the Church*

*Quantitatively measured*

*Objective criteria*

*Measured by:*

*Churches to pop. Ratio  
Average Annual Growth  
% of churched to pop.*

*The Church's impact upon  
society*

*Transformation of the city by  
the Church*

*Qualitatively assessed*

*Subjective criteria*

*Measured by:*

*Determining the city needs  
and assessing the Church's  
success and effectiveness*

The Church is to aggressively pursue two fundamental goals in its commitment to fulfill the Great Commission. First, determine the degree to which Jesus Christ, through the continuation of His incarnation, is present in every strata of society. Second, assess the degree to which the living presence of Jesus Christ is impacting every segment of society and every social system and

structure that either helps or hinders God's work in the city.

The first goal leads to the saturation of the city by the Church and the second leads to the transformation of individuals, peoples and systems and structures of the city by the Church.



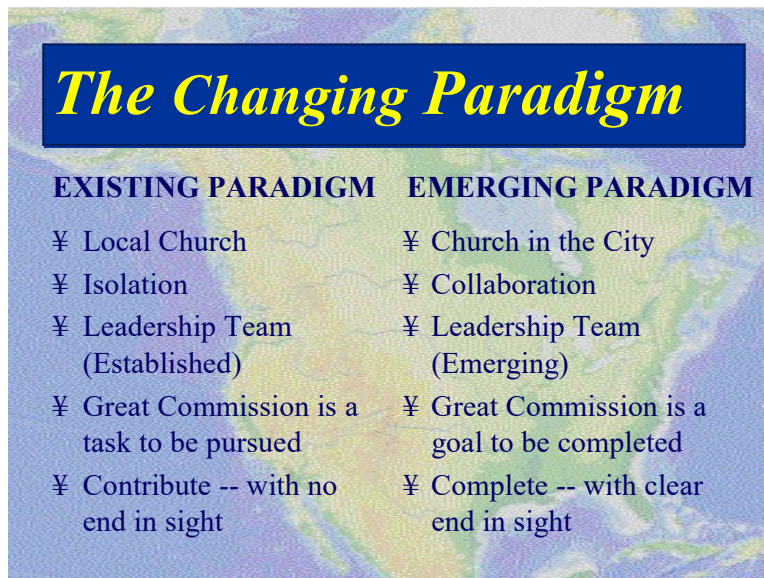
### ***Great Commission Goal For Reaching Your City***

***To establish gatherings of believers  
within geographic, ethnic and cultural  
access of every person of every class,  
kind and condition of mankind, where  
Jesus Christ is incarnated in all His  
love, care, truth and power, and His  
message is proclaimed.***

Put into narrative format, an outcome goal for the Church in its efforts to reach the city, might read something like this, "to establish gatherings of believers within geographic, ethnic, and cultural access to every person of every class, kind and condition of mankind, where Jesus Christ is incarnated in all His love, care, truth and power, and His message is proclaimed." Everything the Church does should contribute to this over-arching goal.

The Church in every city must measure its progress and strategically focus its resources on extending Christ's presence and impact in the city. This will lead to an increasing saturation and transformation of the city by the Church.

The Lord of the Church is giving a new paradigm, a new way of looking at ministry in order to accomplish this. What is viewed as an innovation today, will become the dominant paradigm of ministry tomorrow.



EXISTING PARADIGM	EMERGING PARADIGM
¥ Local Church	¥ Church in the City
¥ Isolation	¥ Collaboration
¥ Leadership Team (Established)	¥ Leadership Team (Emerging)
¥ Great Commission is a task to be pursued	¥ Great Commission is a goal to be completed
¥ Contribute -- with no end in sight	¥ Complete -- with clear end in sight

The existing Church paradigm views the local church as its singular focus and emphasis.

The local church chooses, in its autonomy, to live in isolation from all other congregations.

Its leadership team consists of pastors, elders and deacons.

It believes that everything it does contributes to the Great Commission. It's preaching, teaching, evangelism, discipleship, age level ministries, small groups, worship, each contributes to the Great Commission in some manner. In other words, the Great Commission is something we give ourselves to in an ongoing fashion as if it has no end in sight.

This view has led the local church to justify its isolation, believing that it can fulfill its responsibility to the Great Commission without any involvement with any other segment of the Church. It can preach, teach, evangelize, disciple, and do all of its ministries without any involvement with any other segment of the Body of Christ. In Great Commission reality this isn't true, and has never been true. In the early Church each house church or local congregation went about fulfilling its mission in the city connected to all other congregations seeing clearly how their individual contribution complimented the work of the whole. Isolation has eliminated this, collaboration can enable it.

Eddie Smith, US Prayer Track director, has contrasted the

experiences of Genesis 11 (tower of Babel) and Luke 11 (the house divided against itself) to suggest that unity enables and disunity disables. Isolation robs us of any hope of effectiveness. The Devil is not our greatest enemy, disunity is.

The emerging Church paradigm enlarges its circle of awareness to embrace the whole Body of Christ in the city.

Local church autonomy results in living in collaboration with one another. It affirms as a fundamental spiritual reality that there is one Church in the city comprised of many congregations, and there is one Church in America made up of many denominations and it is the responsibility of the one to disciple the many.

Although a leadership team already exists in the local church, one must now emerge to give leadership and direction to the Church in the city.

The Great Commission should be viewed not as a task to which we are simply called to contribute, but is pursued as a goal to be completed.

Once we begin to view the Great Commission as a goal, we quickly see that no pastor, church, or denomination can complete the goal by themselves. We see that passages like I Corinthians 12, which have until now been applied only to the local church, are just as applicable, and perhaps more applicable to the Church in the city. No pastor, no church, no church group, can say to another, "you aren't part of the Body" or, "you aren't needed in the Body." The Scripture says just the opposite is true. Every person, every church, every church group is essential to the proper working of the Body of Christ as we seek to accomplish the plans and purposes of God in our area of influence and responsibility.

In the emerging paradigm, the Epistles are interpreted from the perspective of the Church in the City. The New Testament Epistles were written to just such a church. Each was written to the Church in a city, to Corinth, Philippi, Colossae, and others. The Scripture was written to the Church in the city which existed as one Body comprised of many member congregations.

In Acts 8:3 we are told that, "Saul began ravaging the Church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison." He ravaged the Church. Which Church? The Church in Jerusalem. How did he do that? By going from house to house where believers lived and congregated. There was one Church in Jerusalem comprised of many



house churches or local congregations.

In Acts 14:23 we see that the Apostle Paul on his first missionary journey went to city after city evangelizing and congregationalizing the converts from each city. He would then leave and go to the next city, until he reached the furthest extent of his travel, where he stopped, turned around and went back to the very cities through which he had just come. In verse 23 we are told, *“and when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in which they had believed.”* Did Paul appoint elders in every one of the ten, twenty, thirty or forty house churches in the city? Or, did he appoint a team of servant leaders, called elders, who provided spiritual oversight to the one Church in the city? This oversight provided for accountability and inter-connectedness for the whole Body of believers in that city.

As a pastor I struggled to find, understand, and put into place the “biblical polity” of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Church. What I discovered, only after my own paradigm shift, is that elders were not appointed in the *local* church, they were appointed for the Church in the city. This is clear in Acts 14:23, and even more clearly stated in Titus 1:5, where Paul wrote to Titus, *“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you.”* What was the New Testament polity for local church governance? We don’t know. We aren’t told. We have freedom to determine that for ourselves. But what we do know is that elders, a spiritual team of servant leaders, were appointed for the Church in every city.

Paul declares in his letter to the Church living in Ephesus, *“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”* Why? Because *“There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of us all, who is over all and through all and in all.”* There is one Church in every geographic area where it exists.

This Kingdom paradigm was the dominant paradigm of the early Church. It should come as no surprise that the paradigm of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Church, to whom the Great Commission was first given, would become the dominant paradigm of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century



Church, who will likely complete the Great Commission.

According to John 17, I Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4 and other passages we must move beyond unity as a theological concept only, where we speak of unity and display our unity in public gatherings. We must *demonstrate* unity as a functional and practical reality. Only then can we complete God's plan and purpose for our city.

Though we do not need to give up or ignore our doctrinal distinctives and beliefs, we need to understand that it is our distinctives that have convinced us that we are different from one another and have led us to separation and sectarianism. It is that set of beliefs in non-essential points that has led to our isolation and ineffectiveness. We are discovering, primarily through the prayer movement, that we can come together around common values. The pre-eminent value is the prominence, the magnificence, of Christ. In Him we can come together around that which we hold in common rather than separate over that which has become our distinctive. When we draw close to the person of Christ, we come away with the heart of Christ. We are discovering that we can unite first around the Person of Christ, and secondly around a value of near equal significance, the mission of Christ.

Whereas we target people like ourselves through the ministry of the local church, the Church in the city is responsible to target *all* peoples in its effort to complete the Great Commission.

We no longer view the church simply as time and place—the First Baptist Church on the corner of 4<sup>th</sup> and Main, at 11:00 Sunday morning. We no longer evaluate the effectiveness of the Church by the number of doors that are open to the community—churches that people could get to, but most would not go to. We were never called to be a “come to” kind of people. We are to be a “go to” people. We begin to ask not to what degree can people get to us, but to what degree can we get to the people of our city, and who is currently beyond geographic, ethnic and cultural reach of the Church.

Many observers are misguided when they conclude that we have enough churches already and that all we need to do is fix the ones that already exist. Though this refocusing and revitalization effort is absolutely essential to reaching America, it is not near enough by itself. Some are lulled into believing we have already saturated our nation with the Church through our

375,000 congregations (that is one church for every 700 people). George Barna estimates that 45% of the US population attends a house of faith on a given Sunday. Others suggest that 25-30% of the US population are born-again believers in Christ, and 10-20% of metropolitan America is churchied.

These observers fail to see the ethnic, generational and socio-cultural diversity of our nation. They are unaware of the 108 ethnic groups of Portland, Oregon, the majority of which have no Gospel witness, or the ninety-five language groups spoken in the Dallas school system, or the eighty-six in Fresno, California, and forty-five in Denver, Colorado. They are unaware of the 34,000 Chinese living in St. Louis, the 40,000 Hmong in Fresno, and the 44,000 Filipinos in Las Vegas. The world now lives in the backyard of every major US city and it is the responsibility of the Church in every city to reach them. One author has suggested that if we fail to reach ethnic America, we will miss America.

The time boundaries that mark the generations continues to collapse and the dissimilarity between them widens. The builders, boomers, busters, and now the millennials are more culturally distinct from one another than at any other point in the history of mankind. This is a challenge the Church has never faced before.

The socio-cultural distinctives between peoples continues to grow more pronounced. Yes, there are 375,000 churches that the people of America could get to. Yet, with 70-80% of the churches in America plateaued or declining and having lost their voice and bridges into the community of people around them, we have only 80,000 "life-giving" churches who are able to minister effectively to the 200 million people in our nation who remain outside of Christ, most of whom are beyond reach of Christ through His Church.

Presence and impact, saturation and transformation are bed-rock issues facing the Church of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

This is a dominant paradigm that has the power to radically transform the effectiveness of the Church and radically transform life in our cities.

The Church in Portland, Oregon, numbers approximately 400,000 believers. What could just half the Church do, 200,000 Christians, walking in unity, to extend the saturation and transformation of the city? What could 100,000 Christians do, representing only 25% of the Church, or even 50,000 Christians repre-

senting a mere 12% of the Church? Experience has demonstrated that by the time the Church in nations of Western Europe have moved through the initial mobilization effort 30-40% of the Church has mobilized to reach the nation. IN Latin America that percent increased to 50-60%. What might it be in America? Probably somewhere between the two. When we view, and experience unity in this functional sense the words of our Lord take on deeper meaning when He said, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against the Church."

So how does this all work?



There are three independent and consecutive processes involved in an effective city reaching effort: the **objective**, which is God's vision for the city; **strategy**, mobilizing the Church; and the **tactical**, which is the implementation process. We must begin by clarifying the ultimate objective, then move to a strategy to accomplish the objective, and lastly, determine and initiate the appropriate tactics to support the strategy.

The point that I want to make is this, in America we move quickly from an unclear definition and description of the objective or vision and move directly to the tactics of what we are going to do to accomplish it.

From a practitioner standpoint the danger in doing this is that in the absence of good theory and a sound strategy, success-

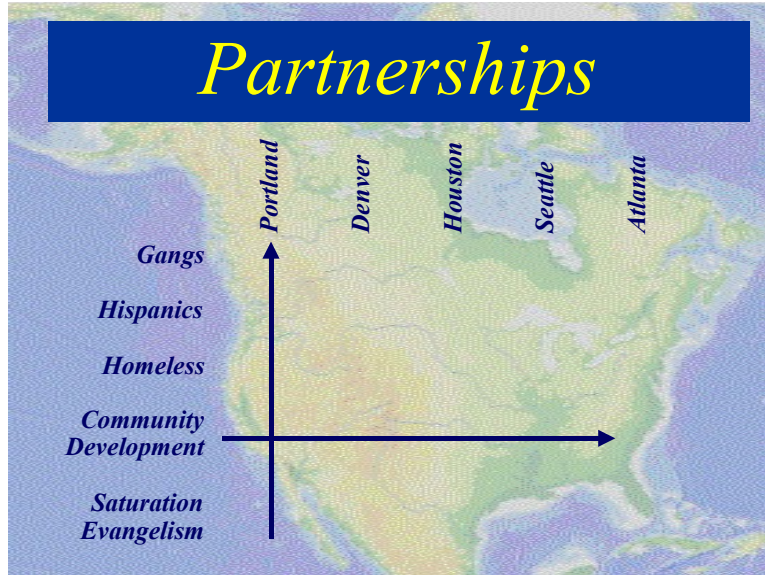
ful practitioners run the risk of hindering the city-reaching process by teaching others what they did in their own cities without teaching them the principles or theoretical framework of the strategy that guided their efforts. A programmatic model typically grows out of this approach.

There is a second problem that has been verified through experience with pastors over and over again. I have found several things to be true; pastors have a deep passion for the Lord to impact their city in a profound and significant way and they understand that this will occur only to the degree to which the Church is able to come together in unity to reach the city.

Pastors are quick to acknowledge they do not generally know how to move from the point of their burden for the city and unity for the Church, to establishing a process that would result in both. So what do pastors typically do? Each group of pastors or churches live like Israel did in the time of the Judges, each doing what is right in their own eyes. They invite into the city a myriad of groups doing a host of activities, with what results?



This is not a picture of collaboration and connectedness but of duplication, competition, isolation and loss of effectiveness.



Another way of viewing this problem is to recognize that partnering with others for the purpose of ministry is a positive and constructive effort. The Church is more effective ministering together than independently. Examples of this abound such as forming partnership alliances to minister to gangs, the homeless, children at risk, to name just a few. However, these tactical activities, when practiced in the absence of an overall strategy, become less effective for impacting the whole city. By contrast, a strategic approach does not begin with the question “how can we do evangelism, or minister to the homeless, better together?” but, “how can we reach Portland, Oregon, or Denver, Colorado, or Houston, Texas?” Rather than starting with the pieces, as in a tactical approach, the Church begins with the whole determining comprehensively what must be done to reach the city and then birthing tactical partnerships to address each piece.



From one point of view these tactical efforts and citywide initiatives, when formed apart from a strategic whole city effort, look like a box of toothpicks dropped at random on a table top.

God is doing many wonderful things in every city of America today. However, when we approach our work in this disconnected way we make it nearly impossible to complete the goal of reaching the whole city and doing it together in unity.

Pastors have suggested two frustrating outcomes to this situation. First, the movements created by these methods engages only a small part of the Church, not the whole Church, or even a significant percentage of the whole. Second, those movements are not sustainable over time. So when the crusade is over, the distribution is complete, the energy behind the event or effort has ebbed, the Church is left asking the same set of questions as when it began. "Where are we?" "What did this method accomplish?" "Where are we going?" "What do we do next?"





But where the Church enters a strategic process, attempting to bring alignment to the Body, harnessing and focusing its resources and energies in an effort to strategically address its mission field, aiming at saturating and transforming the city and its societies, significant results are possible!

There isn't time in this session to provide more than this theoretical description and defense for city reaching. The process and actual framework of city-reaching must be left for another time.

The roots of my theoretical and practical framework for city-reaching are in the DAWN Movement worldwide. What I have shared with you is the contextualization of an approach to global evangelism that is being successfully implemented in more than 120 nations around the world. It is endorsed by the World Evangelical Fellowship (parent organization to the US National Association of Evangelicals), the AD 2000 & Beyond Movement (expressed through the National Initiative Proposal), and the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, and by a growing number of cities in America, as the most effective means of completing the Great Commission in this generation.

What I believe is now needed from Church Growth theorists and practitioners, like yourselves, is to turn our combined efforts toward studying, evaluating, measuring and resourcing the



Church in the City much like the Church Growth movement has done for local congregations in the past. If I am correct in suggesting that city-reaching will become the predominant paradigm of the next century and will become the normal manner by which the Church lives and ministers together we must begin now to help answer the myriad of questions that are already arising from those who are committed to walking together in this manner. Believing that there will be no fewer than 500 independent city-reaching projects emerging in the coming years many theorists and practitioners, guides and consultants, will be needed to support and empower the Church on this new and exciting journey.

There is still much to learn and much more to do. We are convinced that the most compelling and over-arching message of the Holy Spirit to the Church around the world today is that we are a people of destiny. Though every generation of Christians has had the calling to complete the Great Commission, many Christian leaders believe that we are the first who has the means to do it, and we are committed to doing it. Once a people, city or nation is "discipleable" by God's standards, He may choose to bring in the harvest for an undetermined period of time, though our suspicion is that the culmination of the age is not far off. Our objective is to saturate every small group of people with the presence of Jesus Christ with the goal of transforming their lives individually, and society corporately. This is where God is going. We are compelled to go with Him.

Writer

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