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Fit Churches Missionally Engaged

Phil Stevenson

Dr. Gary McIntosh made the following observation in a lecture he was giving regarding the connection between a healthy and fit church: *If I were to go to the doctor for a physical I would be deemed healthy. There is nothing to indicate that I might be unhealthy. However, if I was to attempt to run one or two miles I would be very winded, as I am not fit (this is not to say he is not fit as of this writing). I wonder if there is a difference between a healthy and a fit church.*

This concept of church health and fitness has intrigued me. Is there a difference between a healthy church and a fit church? Might a church move from unhealthy to healthy, but fall short of fitness? If a church can be healthy, but not fit, what does that mean? How does a healthy church move toward fitness? Does a healthy church need to be fit in order to be effective? My short conclusion is that a church can be healthy but not fit. And just as in our physical being, fitness can enhance health. Therefore, healthy churches should move to fitness.

What does a fit church look like? In a broad stroke, a fit church is a missional church. I will go into further detail as to what it means to be missional, but as a beginning point I provide a list taken from the book, *Breaking the Missional Code*. In this book the authors, Stetzer & Putnam, make the following contrast between healthy and missional. I have inserted "fit" as a descriptor of missional.

Healthy Church	Missional (Fit) Church ¹
Members as ministers	Members as missionaries
Discipleship	Missional living
Development Programs	People Empowerment
Team Leadership	Personal mission
Reaching Community	Transforming Community

Training	Releasing
Internal group multiplication	Church planting multiplication
Diversity	Mosaic
Ecclesiocentric	theocentric
Great Commandment	Missio Dei

Defining Fitness

The Stetzer/Putnam list highlights the distinction can be made between that which is healthy and that which is fit or missional. Using fitness and missional interchangeably, let's delve a bit deeper into what it means to be missional.

To be missional is to participate in the ministry of Jesus to the world, and to be the "incarnational" presence of Jesus in the world. A missional church moves outward as a rescue force. A missional church is unwilling to stay safely sequestered in the confines of its "building," but it has as its passion to connect with those in the community in which it has been placed. To be missional is to live a transformed life in front of those outside the walls of the church.

Being missional is going out into the culture to engage the culture in order to connect those in the culture to Christ. In essence it is Great Commission living (Go and make) with a Great Commandment heart (Love your neighbor). It is in going out a church gains a level of fitness. Just as a healthy person may not do any intentional exercise, a healthy church can become self-absorbed and unwilling to be intentional in its exercise...going out!

Being sent and going out is central to the ministry of those who follow Christ. It is an extension of Jesus being sent by the Father into the world. God the Father sent God the Son and God the Son sends us empowered by God the Spirit. As Jesus *was* the incarnation of God in the world, the church *is* to be the incarnation of Jesus in the world.

The need for churches to become fit is huge. We must get ourselves on a fitness program. Reggie McNeal states: "The need of the North American church is not a methodological fix. It is much more profound. The church needs a mission fix."²

- The combined populations of the United States and Canada comprise the third largest mission field of unsaved persons in the world (only China & India have more)
- There are an estimated 350,000 churches in the United States, with an average attendance of about 125 persons per church
- If every church in America doubled its attendance, there

would still be 190 million people not in church on an average Sunday

- The number of Americans who have "no religious preference" has doubled from 1990 to 2001, reaching 14% of the population³

The church cannot afford to do business as usual and make the impact that is needed. We cannot afford to remain in our healthy, but flabby, state and expect to have long-lasting impact. "The current church culture in North America is on life support. It is living off the work, money, and energy of previous generations from a previous world order."⁴ It is time to get on a fitness program. It is time to stop telling ourselves we will begin tomorrow. It may begin with walking before running, but it must begin now!

Fitness as Lifestyle

A mentor once told me that a one-word definition for motivation is dissatisfaction. Until a person is dissatisfied enough, they will never be genuinely motivated to change. My dissatisfaction came at the end of 2005. I know I had put on weight, but unless I saw a picture of myself I had all kinds of rationale as to why I wasn't really overweight. I was having yearly physicals and everything was fine. The key indicators (blood pressure, prostate, cholesterol, etc...) were alright. Yet when it got to the point I didn't want a picture taken, or if I did I would not look at it, then it was time to change. I was dissatisfied. I realized I was healthy (free of disease) but I was not fit.

Churches need to become dissatisfied with themselves. They need to look at a different picture of themselves. A church may be alright in some key areas (unity, Bible teaching, small groups, pastoral care, evangelistic events, etc...), but are they engaging their community? Are they serving outside of themselves? Are people coming to Christ? Are people being baptized? It could be there is a refusal to get their picture taken in these areas; and if they do, they prefer not to look. A church may be healthy (free of spiritual disease), but is it fit?

Out of my dissatisfaction came choices: 1) Eat differently, but not diet; 2) Exercise regularly. The idea was to begin with what could be handled and take small consistent steps. I wanted a different lifestyle, not a quick fix that would be lost. So in January 2006 the determine course was set: eat differently, exercise regularly.

Churches need to make choices out of their dissatisfaction. These choices will result in changes. The first choice is to be honest. Churches tend toward one of three corporate mentalities

1. An emphasis on *membership*. This is the "club" mentality. Much like a club, the church exists for its members. This keeps the church ingrown and tends toward ill-health.
2. An emphasis on *ministers*. This is the "community" mentality. There is a desire to understand gifts, talents and service, but typically the service is for those in the church. People are mobilized, but in a limited capacity. This church may be healthy, but since most of its energy is to serve those who enter in they may not be fit as it has been defined here.
3. An emphasis on *missionaries*. This is the "cultural" mentality. The church exists for those out in culture they have been called to serve. Members are mobilized to minister, but the ministry is outward focused.

A church must know the mentalities with which it functions. A proper understanding allows for the opportunity to make correct choices. It will be a challenge for a church to move from the "club" mentality to the "community" mentality and more so to move to the "cultural" mentality. *"Member values clash with missionary values."*⁵

The present mentality dictates the course of action a church needs to take. It also dictates the pace at which it can go to make the necessary changes. It's one thing to move from minimal activity to more frequent activity, and something completely different to move from a sedentary lifestyle to an active one. A fitness lifestyle can be undermined if one begins too quickly. Early encouragement helps a person, or a congregation, stay on course to the life they want.

A second choice is to identify and remove roadblocks. One major roadblock for me was exercise. I needed a place to do this, so I joined a local YMCA. That helped for a time, but soon it became easier to not go than to go. The big reason: it was not convenient. Next, I tried walking/running outside. That lasted only as long as the weather was good. And in Indiana, that is not always the case, so this too waned. So, I had to choose to overcome two major roadblocks: inconvenience and inclement weather. The solution was to buy a treadmill. It was convenient, (in my house), and I got to stay inside to avoid the problems of the inclement weather.

In my Wesleyan tradition there are three big roadblocks that keep us from becoming fit. They are heritage, holiness and houses.

We neglect our heritage. The Wesleyan movement was birthed in going. John Wesley claimed the world as his parish, not four walls of a church. He proclaimed, *"We cannot expect them*

to seek us. Therefore, we should go and seek them." Social action and involvement in the ills of society are not just Wesleyan, they are Christian. It is who we are as Christ followers. We have neglected this too long. It is time to rediscover our spiritual roots.

In reality any movement could have the same roadblock. Our entire Christian movement was birthed in encountering the society in which it found itself. Throughout history those who called themselves followers of Christ railed against injustice, immorality and abuse of others. A fit church will recognize this roadblock and demolish it.

We compromise our holiness. This may seem odd, but we have used holiness to disengage from the world. Historically we have fled the "hotbeds" of sin (e.g. cities) to remove ourselves from its influence. We have removed ourselves to be "set apart" unto the Lord.

This is a misunderstanding of the holiness doctrine. We are sanctified to be in the world, not drawn out of it. We are set-apart not to depart, but delve deeply into society. Holiness informs us that we can have a *clean heart, even though we have dirty hands*. We are sanctified to serve with confidence in the Savior we have committed ourselves.

Call it what you will: Holy Huddle, Circling the wagons, pulling into purity; the result is the same...we remove ourselves from the world. The church is an investment in its cultural setting. It is placed there to return Kingdom dividends. Fear of being compromised by sin results in being diluted in impact. People in a fit church will move out in faith even though they have fear.

We build our houses at the expense of ministry. We have shifted from building up people, to building bigger and better houses, or places of worship. We do this at the expense of neglecting the needs around us. We might take to heart the words of the prophet Haggai when he declares, "You hoped for rich harvests, but they were poor. And when you brought your harvest home, I blew it away. Why? Because my house lies in ruins, says the Lord Almighty, while you are all busy building your fine houses" (Haggai, 1:9).

In this passage Haggai is referring to the neglect of the temple, but we know, now, that the true temple is a spiritual house. "And now God is building you, as living stones, into his spiritual temple..." (I Peter 2:5). We can get so caught up in the "building" (facility) of the church that we forget we are called to the *building* (people) of the church. The building of the spiritual temple begins with connecting people to Jesus. "...And God has given us the task of reconciling people to him" (II Cor.5:18).

It can happen to any church. The emphasis on having a nice building at the expense of ministering to those we are called to engage. There is not one thing wrong with a building as long as it is viewed in the proper context as a tool, not an end in itself. A fit church views their facility as a sending center not merely a gathering place. It is an outpost, not a fortress. It is the hub of ministry activity, not a hangout for saints.

Once choices have been made, you have to live with those choices. John Maxwell says, "*You make a decision once...then you manage it daily.*"⁶ A church that has chosen to move toward fitness must manage this choice. In my example I have managed the choice by stop eating when I am full, run 4-5 days per week, and track my progress. These three things have helped manage my one choice. It has been in the daily management changes happen.

How does a church track its progress? There are three tracking systems that may help: 1) Equip people for mission; 2) Engage the culture; 3) External focus.

Equip People for Missionary Work

A fit church will equip their people as missionaries to their culture. They will be given tools to better understand the post-modern, post Christian world in which they live. Training in conversational evangelism will be a critical component of this equipping. Leaders of fit churches are not content with past methodologies they understand that culture shifts, so do the rules of engagement. People should be culturally-equipped to be Jesus in their world. Evangelistic methodology is not about getting people out of their indigenous environment into a new environment; it is about enabling believers to recognize their indigenous status and sharing the Good News within the context of that status.

Engage the Culture

Fit churches strive to view their community through the eyes of a missionary. The culture is "exegeted." That is, you figure out what the culture says, and what the culture means, then meet what it needs, not what you think it needs. A missionary attempts to understand the culture they are sent to without assumptions. They don't assume their culture, they want to understand it. A culture that is understood is better engaged. Ministry can flow toward the actual needs of the community, not perceived needs.

The first church I pastored was in Southern California. Ken was a member of that church. Ken loved sports. He oversaw the

church's athletic ministry. When I arrived, we had a softball team and basketball team, both of which participated in local church leagues. He was well-connected to city softball leagues. He umpired for many years and competed on city teams.

One day as we were chatting, Ken shared his heart to use sports to reach men and women in the city. I looked him in the eye and said, "Ken, God wants to use you to do just that. I will do all I can to help you." Tears welled up in this bear of a man. It was at that point he felt a release to engage the sports culture of that city.

God honored Ken's heart. We grew from one softball and basketball team competing in church leagues to five softball teams (men's, women's and co-ed), two co-ed volleyball teams and one basketball team. Most of the teams were in the city league and were largely populated by un-churched people. Many came to Christ as a result of those teams.

What happened? Ken was released to engage his culture. It was the "culture" of city sports. He was freed to engage people where they were with a method they could connect. People played on a church team, but did not have to attend the church; yet many began to attend. People played on a church team, but did not have to confess Christ as Lord; yet many began to do just that. A church with a missional approach does ministry to connect with people, not simply connect them to church.

External Focus

It is easy for a church to become preoccupied with itself. Inward musing is much easier than outward ministry. This is where the importance of placing emphasis on members-as-missionaries is critical. A missionary mentality focuses externally. It strategically looks outside itself to determine the best methodology to engage the culture.

In recent years local churches have ramped up their membership expectations. Membership has become a statement of higher commitment, not merely increased privilege. This begs the question: Why would "membership" in the Kingdom be any less demanding than membership in a high-expectation church?

Believers will never be effectively mobilized apart from a deep sense of service. Salvation is both personal (saved from our sin) and community (saved to engage in purposeful service). This common, but divergent salvation results in active participation in mission. It is the mission of responding to our "sentness."

We are saved to be a missionary people. The church is to equip its people for this salvation purpose. This equipping is about three things: community, spirituality and mission. Each is

separate, but intimately connected in their role of mobilization.

The challenge is balance. Salvation can be, selfishly, an end point; but service can be misconstrued as the only indicator of our salvation. Salvation is not just for us, but for others; yet we must not forget it is for us! However, our salvation is best lived out in our service for others. God saves us personally, so we might serve publicly.

This is the emphasis the community of believers must place on membership. Members are to be missionaries in their world. Missionaries are not those who venture cross culturally, nor overseas. Missionaries are people who boldly engage their world in purposeful living.

A missional (fit) church invests beyond itself. It is recognizing that the "scoring system" is much more than measuring what happens on the property, or in the building. Keeping score is not the issue. We do, and should, keep score. What changes is the scoring system. "Our definition of church is what we do seven days a week, almost twenty-four hours a day, all year long! It is just who we are."⁷

For example, I am not a fisherman, but it would seem logical that the success or failure on a fishing outing would be based on the number of fish caught. This makes sense, but it is not necessarily the case. I came across this definition of a successful fishing trip, "Spending a day without a cell phone or a pager and not missing it."

This definition changes the effectiveness of fishing. Once the score is understood then the necessary steps can be taken to be effective in the scoring system. A church that determines to ask this question of mission is moving from programs to process, models to mission, attraction to incarnation, seating to sending, and decisions to disciples. It is moving toward a corporate life-style of fitness.

Conclusions

The prayer had to be said. Words were not enough. Jesus was soon to be arrested, tried, abandon, crucified, dead, buried and, eventually, resurrected. But what he had shared was too much. His disciples may have thought they understood what he was sharing (John 16:16-28). They told him so when they declared, "Now we understand..." (John 16:30). But he knew they really did not understand. How could they? They were about to enter one of the darkest times of their "follower-ship."

They would see him dead on a cross. The vividness of his death would extinguish their hope like a bucket of water poured on a lit match. And once hope is gone discouragement, disen-

agement and disinterest are not far behind. It would be easy for them to compromise on their call. The words they said they had understood would be lost in the hollowness of his death. They needed prayer. A prayer that would empower them once the realization of his resurrection shattered the reality of his death! They would need to be reminded that they are a missionary, sent, people; because he was a missionary, sent, Savior.

The prayer of Jesus, recorded by John in the seventeenth chapter of his gospel, clarifies missional ministry. In this prayer of commissioning, Jesus vividly portrays the missional aspect of ministry: His, the disciples and ours.

The missional ministry of Jesus: God gave (sent) His Son into the world out of His love for the World (John 3:16-17). God did this out of a heart of salvation, not condemnation. Jesus undergirds this in his prayer when he declares, "And this is the way to have eternal life—to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth" (John 17:3). Jesus makes clear that the strength of his followers is that they understood his being sent. "Now they know that everything I have is a gift from you, for I have passed on to them the words you gave me; and they accepted them and know that I came from you, and they believe you sent me."

The missional ministry of the disciples: Jesus' physical ministry on the earth was limited to a three-year span. He was going to depart and leave them behind (John 17:11). They would now need to take up the "sent" mantle. They are not to be taken out of the world (John 17:15), but sent into the world as Jesus modeled for them. "As you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world" (John 17:18). Being sent, going out is central to the ministry of those who follow Christ. It is an extension of his being sent by the Father into the world.

The missional ministry of the twenty-first century: He extends the same ministry to us today. The same prayer he prayed for his followers in the first century he prayed for us. "I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me because of their testimony" (John 17:20). We are part of the "all who will ever believe." Our acceptance of the message! Our decision to believe should result in the same "sentness" of the first disciples. The time distance between us and the death and resurrection of Jesus does not negate the commission to being sent.

The church has lost this missional mentality. We have forgotten it is not about people coming to us, but us going to people. When we go! When we fully engage in being sent we extend the ministry for which Jesus prayed. It is in our going that we fulfill the prayer of Jesus. In a sense, it is in our "sentness" we

are an answer to Jesus' prayer.

"My prayer for all of them is that they will be one, just as you and I are one, Father—that just as you are in me and I am in you, so they will be in us, and the world will believe you *sent me*" (John 17:21).

"I in them and you in me, all being perfected into one. Then the world will know that you *sent me* and will understand that you love them as much as you love me" (John 17:23).

"O righteous Father, the world doesn't know you, but I do; and these disciples know you *sent me*" (John 17:25).

It is clear that when we respond to our missional call the world catches glimpses of Jesus. The church's willingness to engage the world in the world is a singular clarion call to the reality of God! People best see God and engage God when His church is going out.

It is the church acting in its "sentness." Salvation is not an ending, but a radical beginning. When we stop at "our" salvation we negate our deep felt gratitude. It is out of our gratitude our call to serve springs. Service is more than an activity we engage in, but it is a responsibility in which we must immerse ourselves. Service is a tangible living out of being sent. Missional engagement is the earmark of a fit church.

Writer

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NOTES

1. Breaking the Missional Code, Stetzer & Putman, Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, c. 2006, p.49
2. The Present Future, by Reggie McNeal, p.10
3. Christian Science Monitor 2001 Survey, quoted by Reggie McNeal in The Present Future, p.3
4. The Present Future, by Reggie McNeal, p.1
5. The Present Future, by Reggie McNeal, p.1.
6. Today Matters, by John Maxwell, New York: Center Street Publishers, p.15, c. 2004
7. Tillie Burgin, quoted in Breaking the Missional Code, c.2006, p.59

Evangelism and Social Action—Revisiting an Old Debate: Good News for Immigrants and Evangelicals Too

Norman G. Wilson

How did evangelicals come to debate whether or not there is a connection between evangelism and social action in the first place? And why is this question so crucial regarding the ministry of evangelicals among immigrants? In this essay, I will address the character of this debate, call attention to the inadequacies of modernist theological responses, suggest ways in which post-modern evangelicals can provide a more adequate and biblically faithful approach, and explore its implications for ministry among immigrants.

Laura's Parents Would Not Understand

Karisa, an innocent little Hispanic girl in our church, is crying on the floor in the corner until Laura gives her a gentle hug, assures her that it was just a little bump on the elbow, and then dries her tears with a Kleenex¹. As I watched them, I remembered Laura's words to me the day before in my office at the university. "I don't think I can talk with my family over the school break about what God has been teaching me here at Iglesia Amistad Cristiana. Even though they are good Christians, they just wouldn't understand."

Each semester several students from my evangelism class, including Laura, complete their ministry practicum at the Hispanic church to which my wife and I belong. Most of them come from middle class evangelical homes and are preparing for cross-cultural careers in North America or abroad.

When little Karisa's sobbing had subsided, I overheard her say to Laura, "My daddy doesn't have to go to work anymore."

Later at the church dinner, I sat beside Karisa's dad, Jaime, and asked him how things were going. After a brief pause, he