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## TRANSFORMING NEIGHBOURHOODS: GROUNDING THE GREAT COMMISSION ON THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

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*Many of our relationships have become denuded and reduced to functionality. We are respected for what we do, not known for who we are. Much of our urban landscape has become dysfunctional and our social fabric is deeply torn. The church is not much different. Many Christians hold at best a loose relationship with the church and have superficial relationships with each other. The challenge of community calls us to a deep conversion. Moving beyond the self-preoccupation that so characterises our contemporary age, Christians are challenged to a life together that involves mutual care and sharing. This means sharing prayers and resources. It involves mutual confession and encouragement. It includes a commitment to stability and being willing to walk the long journey with brothers and sisters in Christ. The world desperately needs to see a Christianity of embodiment, of words made flesh in a solidarity of the kingdom of God and place of shared leadership, gender equality and empowerment of the laity and is a community that seeks to wash the feet of the world.<sup>1</sup>*

The world is constantly seeking meaningful relationships and a community that one feels accepted and secure. Communities living in the margins have a higher risk of relationships being strained at all levels: spousal, families and neighbours. There is a desperate cry for belonging, acceptance and meaningful relationships. Thus, when the local church is able to live out a community of love and service, it has much to offer its neighbourhood. When the church shifts its priority from focusing on numerical growth and individual spiritual transformation to transforming relationships which culminates in a church that models a community of love and embraces the poor, the church is able to transform neighbourhoods.

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## **Reducing the great commission to numerical growth and individual spiritual transformation**

Some churches appear to adopt a reductionist approach in obeying the great commission. The gospel of the Kingdom of God is reduced to a message that focuses primarily on personal salvation. For this brand of church, the call largely focuses on spiritual transformation and neglects social transformation. In short, the rich vision of Christian transformation has been reduced to a community of spiritual faith that does not meet the social needs of the poor nor does it offer love through practical help and service. This reductionist approach centres on conversions and transformation of individual spirituality. Individual transformation is not translated into empowering the person as part of a community of faith to influence transformation in the neighbourhood. The approach basically starts with an evangelistic programme that reaches out to individuals and neglects the commitment required to build a community of faith and love. Although some measure of social welfare help is thrown in, it is merely a means to draw in individuals to hear the gospel.

The reductionist approach to the great commission, firstly, results in an over-emphasis on individual evangelism and church effectiveness measured largely by numerical growth. Such contemporary church planting methods are in danger of over-emphasizing individual conversions and forgetting the end objective of building a community of faith, love and service.<sup>2</sup> This problem of neglecting community care is particularly magnified in the poor and marginalised communities.

Secondly, the reductionist approach fails to appreciate that at the very heart of the gospel, there is the call to build communities of faith, love and service as opposed to individuals of faith built to evangelise others. As a result, the surrounding poor neighbourhoods comprising different ethnic groups are excluded from the transformative vision. Thus, the scope of life lived under God's lordship in love and service to others outside the church and care for all that God has created is diminished. Moreover, this approach has the danger of deepening hostility between races, or at the very least, failing to address the issue of distancing other religious adherents – as it projects a crusader faith bent on winning numbers, short of charity to the needy and disadvantaged.<sup>3</sup>

Thirdly, the reductionist approach leads to an erroneous assumption that evangelism and conversions would automatically bring about just societies. Looking at some of the most evangelised nations in Africa and South America, it is obvious that these countries are still struggling with a culture of corruption and injustice. When vital consideration of just and ethical values based on loving relationships is dispensed with for the expediency of numerical growth, the church will not become a community of faith and love as God intended it to be. It is not empowered to influence the transformation of society into a kingdom of righteousness, mercy and justice.

Hence, when the church puts the great commission ahead of the greatest commandment, it loses its authenticity. The church is set on a performance mode that contradicts its foundational objective to glorify God through a community sharing God's love. A community exalting crusading evangelism and numerical growth over the greatest-commandment-of-love will result in shallow relationships; it cannot offer a model of God's community of faith, love and service.

### **Recovering the greatest commandment to build communities of faith, love and service**

The great commission of making disciples of all nations must be subject to the greatest commandment to love God and one another. The church needs to be clear of its core vision of mission, for social action is just as much an important and integral call as evangelism. The goal is neither an improved standard of living nor conversions, but a transformed community of faith, love and service. This is achieved only through a balanced and holistic approach.

I have listed below two approaches of a church vision with their respective general characteristics: one subject only to the great commission and the other is the great commission grounded in the greatest commandment.

<i>Spiritual-great-commission-to-go approach</i>	<i>Greatest-commandment-to-love approach</i>
End point is individual conversion and spiritual transformation	End point is community transformation.
Focus is on discipleship with strong emphasis on spiritual transformation and with little emphasis on social transformation	Focus is on spirituality that enjoins spiritual transformation to social transformation.
Community outreach uses conversions or presentation of gospel as performance indicators. This often results in short term presence that works towards conversion and often does not lead towards neighbourhood transformation.	Community outreach infuses community with God's love and witness as performance indicators. This involves commitment to a long term presence that works towards neighbourhood transformation

Members are trained to evangelise.	Members are trained to be faithful witnesses, i.e. lifestyle evangelism.
Emphasis is on individual performance measured by ability to bring in conversions and numbers. Personal faith is integrated with family, work, church and missions (more recently, with the marketplace).	Emphasis is on formation of individual spirituality as a lifestyle which leads to social action and helping the poor. Personal faith is integrated with all aspects of life, including socio-economic well-being, citizenship and governance.
Ministries are church-focused.	Ministries incorporate church, community and individual lifestyle witness.

Failure to appreciate the fundamental vision of developing a community of faith, love and service will have far reaching consequences, and will result in an inaccurate reflection of the gospel. Firstly, as the approach is by default limited to reaching only certain individuals and families in the neighbourhood, it makes it difficult for the local neighbourhood to participate in the local church. Secondly, it does not work towards the holistic and integrated needs of the neighbourhood and even, often times, of its own members. Its programmes are primarily designed as a tool (even tuition classes) for converting individuals and not for transforming the neighbourhood. Sadly, for the poor and marginalised, the good news may be personally engaging but socially irrelevant! Thirdly, mission that is divorced from love and helping the whole person is guaranteed to bring hostility from adverse religious groups; they perceive the church as an agent of conversion, wanting to destroy their culture. This increases the effect of causing offences and allows extremist groups thereby to incite greater polarization. Finally, the spiritual-great-commission approach has the further danger of conveying an implied message: building a community of God's love is secondary to the great commission. Tragically, it is possible to evangelise without loving God or the neighbour.

Indeed, the church which practices only the spiritual-great-commission approach has little relevance to economic inequities, violation of human dignity, ethnic polarization, poor governance, corruption and citizenship roles. At the end of the day, such churches have precluded or derailed themselves from achieving the biblical mode of community transformation and of building a community of God's love. On the contrary, the church with the greatest-commandment-to-love approach takes a long-term view of working towards community transformation. It is there to build a 'church community in mission'<sup>4</sup> with a long-term witness and transformative impact in the neighbourhood. It is noteworthy to see a few churches taking a holistic greatest-commandment-to-love approach, with a long-term commitment to community transformation, aiming to develop a community of faith, love and action.

## **Envisioning a community of faith, love and service that transforms neighbourhoods**

One of the great challenges of our day is to restore the rich vision of the Kingdom of God in working with poor neighbourhoods of all races. This necessitates, first and foremost, the church to be transformed into a community of care that models God's love. That's where the poor and the marginalised are reached holistically, and socio-economic realities are addressed concurrently.

### Transforming the church as a community of faith, love and service

The uniqueness of the gospel lies in the church as a community of faith that models God's love (John 13:34-35).<sup>ii</sup> A biblical approach will empower a community of faith which exemplifies charity and acceptance. It reaches out to others regardless of creed, colour or status, without having them subscribed to its values and conditions. While it is not apologetic about its faith, it does not claim superiority nor does it insist on conversion as condition for acceptance or help. This is the community that reaches out, accepts, mends broken families and reconciles with other races. In doing so, the church is able to invite others to enjoy the gift of God's abundant love.

Concretely, it involves the church meeting the needs of its members at both the spiritual and physical levels. At the same time, the church also motivates, equips and empowers its congregation to be community-minded and engage in social action – demonstrating authentic faith that lives out its Christian values through caring for the poor. Slowly, if the process goes forward, this community of faith, love and service will be able to effect transformation of the neighbourhood. As Christians radiate love for one another and to care for others regardless of creed, colour or class, particularly in a society where relationships are increasingly superficial and flaky, others will be drawn to this unique community that demonstrates authenticity of faith.

The most rewarding part is when families in the neighbourhood begin to accept believers into their lives. But this is only the beginning! The hard work of enlarging the community continues – reaching out to others and creating a place of acceptance for them as part of a community. Ultimately, the church is called to glorify God through living out a community that models His love in word and action. This is what a transformed neighbourhood is: it consists of people who are not hostile towards each other; they are not self-centred; they graciously accept one another, give and receive forgiveness, always present when others are in need and care for one another. In short, these are people who share the love of God.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>ii</sup> “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another John” (cf. Matt 22:37-40).

In this way, the age-old cultural hostilities can be dissolved and the reconciliation work of God can begin. Peacemaking is possible. The solution to the nation's seemingly insoluble problem of racial polarisation can be addressed. The church will not be accused of only helping its members, or neglecting to help those who do not listen to the Good News, nor can the church be labelled as collaborator in dividing the races and sowing a gospel of division.

### Taking on the role to transform marginalised neighbourhood

Marginalised neighbourhoods are the innocent victims of injustice and are at the centre of God's concern. The uniqueness of the church as a community of care must extend to reaching out to the poor and marginalised holistically and proactively.

Good governance and policies and social help may build excellent facilities for the poor. However, the state or human institutions cannot stop unwed pregnancies, abortions, anti-social behaviours, thefts, crimes or drug abuse; neither can they reconcile parent and child or two disputing spouses, nor mend broken homes. The government can legislate, imprison or even teach its citizens to be considerate and conscious of their responsibilities in society. But they cannot make the people to care for one another or to be kind to their neighbours or to love and care for their own families. This is where the church as a community of care can step in with its human touch.

However, many church programmes barely thrive in social care. The poor neighbourhoods continue to suffer from marginalisation and economic injustice. A few practical steps can be taken, for example:

- Larger churches that have more resources to partner with smaller churches who are working in the midst of the poor.
- Spiritual truths such as "My God will supply all your needs" to be translated into earthly practicalities. This may include:
  - helping the poor with affordable educational aids, access to vocational training, income generation, parenting skills, finance management and priority-setting; and
  - educating them how to access social benefits such as vocational training and educational grants or loans, low income allowances, schooling allowances, disability allowances, etc.
- The church to relocate itself locally or set up outreach centre. It should, preferably, partner with existing local churches in managing its outreach centre that provides quality services, e.g. tuition or kindergarten programmes at affordable rates. This will bring in children of all faiths, despite being a programme hosted by the church.

Nonetheless, hostile evangelistic activities may not be conducted during these social help programmes if the church seeks to reach out to all races.

- The church to facilitate its neighbourhood community in addressing local social problems, having their voices heard at local authority establishments and calling for accountability among its leaders. In this way, the community of faith, love and service is able to relate and facilitate the poor neighbourhood towards transformation. It does not become a threat to others as it plays out its role as a responsible citizen in helping all poor, regardless of creed or colour. It is driven by the love of God to bring about the best for its neighbours.

In short, social action is not a mere tool for evangelism. It is part and parcel of living out a community of faith that demonstrates the generous love of God and the peaceable kingdom of God.

#### Addressing unjust socio-economic realities of the nation

In addition to reaching out to the poor and marginalised holistically and proactively, the church needs to address unjust socio-economic realities. The church must embrace a rich vision of God's peaceable kingdom of justice, transforming society and changing the culture of greed, corruption, economic divides and racism. For a start, the church needs to understand the history, the social contract and the politicisation of race and religion. It also needs to understand the deep racial hurts and prejudices among the multi-religious community. Understanding and taking into account such sensitivities will help the church to deal with the age-old racial hostilities and administer healing to deep-seated fears and hurts through loving its neighbours and meeting their needs.

Next, the church needs to acquire skills and provide training on how to address poverty and social injustice. One of the major reasons why the church is not adopting a holistic approach is its ignorance on how to empower the poor and address multi-cultural differences. The church, in fact, needs to teach about race relations, nation-building and citizenship responsibilities, as well as to address the problems of the day such as poverty, adequate food, access to training and jobs, fair wages, housing, education, and safe neighbourhoods.

Thus, the 'church community in mission' approach does not evade the difficult issues of racial polarization and unjust economic divide. Instead, it seeks to gain greater multicultural understanding and do the hard work of building an acceptable multicultural platform with the opportunity to influence community leadership in working towards community transformation.

## Closing thoughts

In sum, the ‘church community in mission’ is a community of faith, love and service. It is a community that

- models God’s love anchored in the greatest commandment;
- creates a place for members to participate in caring for each other and those outside, not merely meeting together for church services;
- provides a neighbourhood community that cherishes meaningful relationships, not merely planting a church;
- lives transparent and genuine lives, witnessed and examined by the neighbourhood;
- addresses members’ spiritual and social needs, and at the same time, invites the poor to participate in its community by being relevant in meeting their needs; and
- engages, integrates and impacts the neighbourhood to develop a godly community, for example, by serving and participating in neighbourhood projects and working towards economic and social justice.

In a multi-religious, multicultural and multiracial society such as Malaysia – where freedom of religion is limited and the economic divide is wide – the church must not avoid addressing realities. The church has to find a local expression and balance to achieve both building the kingdom of God and transforming society, with special focus on marginalised neighbourhoods. In order to effect transformation and to live the call of changing oppressive social structures, the church has to help individuals at both the spiritual and social dimensions. More importantly, it has to build authentic communities of faith that model God’s love where relationships are cherished in a world desperate for genuine and meaningful relationships.

Some current approaches – with efforts placed on conversion of individuals without empowering them to model a community that works towards neighbourhood transformation – seem to have reduced the richness of biblical vision. The gospel shared has little good news for the poor if it fails to address unjust realities, economic inequities and racial division. There is a pressing need to recover the rich vision of God’s peaceable kingdom of justice and mercy by building ‘church communities in mission’ that work towards transforming the poor neighbourhoods. The church, grounded on the principles of the greatest-commandment-to-love, builds communities of faith, love and service. It must never be replaced by the church constructed on the spiritual-great-commission of numerical growth.

This is a call to recover the vision to build a community of faith, love and service – a community that will transform relationships and its neighbourhood. The church is effective



when it is able to offer the authentic sign of faith measured by transformed relationships and love in action. Otherwise, its teachings to love amounts to wishful ideals, offering nothing new from a society whose promises of meaningful relationships are increasingly elusive. Ω

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Ringma, *Seeking the Silences with Thomas Merton* (Regent College Pub.: 2003), p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> I believe that the rationale of starting cell groups is a positive move in the direction of strengthening community. But, it can easily steer away from its true goal when it replaces its core objective of building a community of faith, love and service with evangelism. Hence, cell groups have to keep their vision clear to avoid being side-tracked.

<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, mere social work is also inadequate. It is in this backdrop that more radical models in working with the poor are needed. The gospel has to move beyond the either or other categories (personal redemption to transforming society). It cannot do so through just conversion programmes or social work. The answer is not a simplistic one or the other, and it not necessarily even in sequential order of the two or the two being done simultaneously together. The crux is that a group of believers must come together to live out a community of faith. They must be committed to empower their community to transform the neighbourhood and to promote God's peaceable kingdom of righteousness. Reaching out and social action belong together; so do prayer and service. They all form a web of connectedness in building the Kingdom of God.

<sup>4</sup> A term borrowed from Dr. C. B. Samuel.

<sup>5</sup> Another disadvantage is that social inequalities and injustices are enormous issues; here, the local church itself is not able to address these concerns on its own. Issues of welfare, housing maintenance policies, sink funds, lack of quality infrastructure, "muhibah" development, access to quality education and security require a wider network of partners. The church's ability to deal with advocacy and social justice issues will be limited. This again could be mitigated by encouraging the community leadership to partner wider networks and advocacy services.