

# From Strangers to Missionaries: A Neighborhood Strategy for Mission

by [Tim Brister](#) | Aug 7, 2013 | [Community](#), [Evangelism](#), [Love Your Neighbor](#), [Missional](#)

Over the past month, many people have heard about my “[Jericho Road Moment](#).” That story is part of a bigger story this year where I’m praying and pursuing God’s kingdom work in my neighborhood and city with renewed initiative and intentionality. Over the past couple months, I’ve been working to gain greater clarity on how to make that happen.

Jesus commissioned His disciples to go into the world and make disciples. I believe, first and foremost, Jesus is speaking of cross-cultural engagement of unreached people groups. The thrust has an expansive, horizontal dimension no doubt. But, I also believe that the making of disciples has a *depth* dimension as well. Even in “reached” areas of our cities, there are many unreached and unengaged people. Let’s be honest: What percentage of our city is unengaged with the gospel? What percentage of people have any proximity to the kingdom of Christ?

## A Helpful Diagnostic to Consider

In my city, we have 165,000 people. The best research I could find is that less than 10,000 belong to any church. That means 155,000+ people need the gospel of Jesus Christ. We dwell in the same city, but for all intents and purposes, they are strangers to me and every other Christian and church. When we are not on mission, the way a church “grows” is by shuffling some of the 10,000 when things don’t work out (transfer growth). It may give the appearance that we are reaching our city with the gospel when in reality we are simply receiving Christians who are either new to the area, or done with their previous church. We are skimming the surface with no missional depth to genuinely engage the city, evangelize the lost, and establish new disciples in the faith. Here’s a helpful diagnostic to consider. How many non-Christians do you know on a first-name basis? How many of them would consider you a friend? What percentage of your relationship investments is with those who do not know Jesus Christ? How accessible are you to those in your world who do not know God? If the members of our church cannot, off the top of their heads, list 3-5 unbelievers they know, then we have missional atrophy. If the overwhelming percentage of relationship investments of

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church members are with other Christians, then it has become ingrown. If there are not pathways for pursuing those far from God in our lives, then we have put the Great Commission on the shelf to collect dust.

## The Big Picture

What I've done to help me make sense is to answer the questions: *What will it take for me to go deep into the unengaged sections of my city to make disciples of Jesus? How can I measure missional advance and impact?* To help answer those questions, I have developed this city and neighborhood strategy:

- » **Strangers** need to become Neighbors through missional intentionality.
- » **Neighbors** need to become Acquaintances through incarnational integrity.
- » **Acquaintances** need to become Friends through relational investment.
- » **Friends** need to become Family through evangelical invitation.
- » **Family** needs to become Missionaries through practical instruction.

When I begin, everyone outside of my church family are strangers to me. But when movement takes place, some will become neighbors. Over a period of time, and as deeper engagement takes place, more and more neighbors will become acquaintances, then friends, and then fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who are trained to repeat the process. All of this, in my opinion, is discipleship.

## Moving Downward for Gospel Advance

If we are going to make disciples of Jesus Christ, we have to go after “strangers.” Strangers, those far from God, will not be attracted to our Churches attractional efforts or events. We must go to where they are by pursuing them. This begins by having an intentional approach to ordinary living. If we are threads for kingdom fabric, we are to be woven into the heart of the city with everyday rhythms and networking strategies that introduce you to strangers and invite them to become neighbors. These rhythms include where you eat, when you play, how you shop, etc. The networking strategies have to do with purposeful attempts to connect with people on a repeated basis. (I will tease this out more in a follow up post).

Strangers become neighbors when they know who you are and you know who they are. But the knowledge at this point is very superficial. A neighbor becomes an acquaintance when you begin to have a shared life through the integrity of your incarnational efforts. By that, I mean the sincerity of your words and consistency of your actions create a plausibility to neighbors that gives permission to share life through regular greetings, short conversations, etc.

Acquaintances become friends when you make an intentional investment so that the rhythms of life with other people sync up so that a shared life is more than a casual conversation. You are in their homes, and they are in your home. You connect on a regular basis. They open up to you in ways that you understand the story of their lives,

and as a good listener, learn how the story of the gospel can find redemptive bridges to cross into their world.

Friends become family when you naturally share with your friends who you are and what is most important to you. You tell them your story and how God has made you new. And through the relationship investment, your friend feels safe asking questions and bringing up objections knowing they are not a project to fix or a sale to make. By seeing the impact of the gospel in your life and sharing the good news in everyday evangelistic conversations, friends are invited to brothers and sisters through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.

Family members become missionaries when they walk with you through life-on-life practical instruction on what it means to follow Jesus. They become fluent in the gospel and shaped by the reign of Christ when seeking first the kingdom of God. And they wrestle with the struggles and share in the successes together with you while joining you as a missionary in their neighborhood and city.

## **The Significance of This Strategy**

There are two main aspects of this strategy that I want to highlight. First, you notice that most everything happens outside the main structures and/or events of the church. I am all about church gathered and recognize the need to do attractional church well, but very little Great Commission advance, in my opinion, is achieved by the “come and see” approach. Second, some may argue, “Why don’t you just preach to strangers and see them trust Christ then and there?” In other words, why don’t you go straight from stranger to family? From my experience, this kind of leap truncates discipleship and makes converts, not disciples the goal. I have seen little lasting fruit from evangelism divorced from relationship, presence, and service to the community.

As I plan out my missional engagement to make disciples of Jesus, I want to evaluate the percentage of my relationship investment for gospel advance. How many strangers have become neighbors? How many neighbors can now be considered acquaintances? How many are moving toward becoming friends? Friends to family? Family to missionaries? Where there is no movement to go deep in the community, we will relegate the Great Commission to the swapping of sheep instead of making new disciples of Jesus. We are to be a pioneering people, not a privileged people. Let us go as those who are sent and preach as those who have a saving message, and love as those who have been adopted by our heavenly Father.