



Can a City Be Transformed?

By Neal McGlohon and Dino Senesi

Mohammed was not unlike the other youths in his Ethiopian village. He was [Muslim](#), poor, uneducated, and lived in a small hut. When a Sports Friends team came to his village, they tapped into something else the youths had in common: a love for soccer. As was often the case, after a few hours of playing soccer¹, the sports evangelists were “encouraged” by the village elders and the local imam to leave. And, as was often the case, they left behind a new believer; this time it was Mohammed.

Mohammed began to talk to others about his new relationship with [God](#) and tell them of the [gospel](#) of Jesus Christ, which he learned about through a soccer ball. To no one’s surprise, serious resistance came. His father was told that Mohammed needed to leave the village. If he didn’t, he would be beaten and his whole family could be forced from their home.

The village elders had heard of this Good News coming to other villages and how it had transformed them. They knew it was powerful and viral. Any evidence of the gospel of Jesus coming to their village must be stamped out quickly. Mohammed had to go.

But Mohammed wasn’t about to leave. He sat at the edge of the village refusing to go until his family heard the Good News. His father took him water and food at night and begged him to leave. Go to the city, live with relatives—anything to remove himself and his family from danger. Mohammed told his father he was willing to die, but he couldn’t leave unless he told them what he now knew to be true. He said Jesus had changed his life.

On the third night, Mohammed’s father came to him again. He told his son that the family must hear what the sports evangelists had shared. His father described a recurring dream—which he had experienced over the previous three days—of him and his family falling into a hole of fire.

That night Mohammed shared the gospel with his family, and they all became believers. Soon a few friends in the village became believers as well. As more families came to faith, persecution ramped up. Believers were beaten and forced from their homes. But it was too late. The Good News of Jesus had gone viral.

As Mohammed told his story to me, I listened in awe. And the next part was even more incredible. Nearly the entire village embraced Jesus as Lord and began meeting together at the edge of the village. The imam attended their meeting just a few months before I met Mohammed in Ethiopia. He told the group that he was closing down the mosque and leaving the village. He said he was the last true follower of Islam there; they could have the place.

Imagine the Possibilities

Picture the possibilities. The [Bible](#) contains numerous examples of what happens when God moves in a city. One of them is Nineveh, the largest city in the world at the time. The prophet Jonah had good reasons not to like the people in the corrupt, pagan city of Nineveh—and he didn’t. Eventually, however (after much ado), Jonah went to Nineveh to preach—and he was a major hit. “The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.”² How such a corrupt city could turn so quickly is unfathomable, but God’s power is unstoppable. God went to great lengths running after a reluctant Jonah in order to mobilize him for a city.

A compelling New Testament example is the short story of Peter healing a man who had been bedridden for eight years in the town of Lydda. As a result the news of the power of God, again, went viral, and “all those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw [the healed man] and turned to the Lord.”³

As a more modern example, there was a young coal miner in Wales named Evan Roberts who had prayed for a great movement of God since childhood. In 1904, Roberts preached to a small group of young people one evening in his home church, challenging them to a new level of commitment to Christ. What happened shortly afterward in Wales influenced the world:

¹ For more information, see “Our Story,” *Sports Friends*, www.sports-friends.org.

² *The Holy Bible*, New International Version © 2011, Jonah 3:5.

³ *Ibid.*, Acts 9:35.

In two months, 70,000 were converted, 85,000 in five months, and more than 100,000 in six months. Judges were presented with white gloves signifying no cases to be tried. Alcoholism was halved. At times hundreds would stand to declare their surrender of Christ as Lord. Restitution was made; gamblers and others normally untouched by the ministry of the church came to Christ.⁴

Jack Dennison described city transformation as:

reaching a critical mass of believers who are so empowered by the gospel of Christ that they change everything they touch—family, workplace, schools, business. As this critical mass is achieved, the power of the living God brings significant changes in the problems that plague our cities today—poverty, crime, addictions, gangs, divorce, violence, and a dramatic increase in the things that characterize the kingdom of God—mercy, justice, prosperity (especially for the poor) and compassion.⁵

God wants people and cities to be transformed for his glory. He has proven this throughout history. What's left for us to discover is how we can join him in his incredible vision for the places he sends us—our own cities, communities, and regions.

Cities Are the Solution

God is always interested in more than even his best city leaders can imagine. Paul said flat-out that God “is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.”⁶ His best leaders possess a faith-driven optimism for the supernatural possibilities in the cities they love.

Jaime Lerner, for example, possesses an optimism about cities that has made him a world-renowned urban planner. His fame was established as mayor of Curitiba, Brazil, where he served three terms. He stated a great truth when he said, “Cities are not the problem; they are the solution.” He embraced his hometown of Curitiba and became its citizens’ greatest advocate. “A city’s like our family portrait,” Lerner said, “We don’t rip our family portrait, even if we don’t like the nose of our uncle, because this portrait is you.”⁷

How much more should leaders that God sends to cities feel passion for their people and their problems? Local leaders’ realization that God is inviting the church into the city is crucial to a transformative movement. God has placed city leaders to be city advocates.

The prophet Jeremiah helped the Babylonian exiles understand their responsibility to make their cities better instead of just longing for more safe and comfortable living conditions. Often spiritual leaders in cities secretly long to be in another place; they act like exiles instead of advocates. Among the words Jeremiah spoke to the disgruntled exiles were these: “Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”⁸

The Strategy for a City

In our ministry conversations, we often debate who is responsible for a movement of God that transforms a city. What is God’s part? What is our part? We take the old high-school debate team approach, dividing the room into teams and assigning them “their side” of the argument. What we have learned over the years through our numerous “debates” is there’s strong biblical evidence for both. At this point we have no choice but to employ conventional wisdom: Work like it’s all up to us. Pray like it’s all up to God.

Both principles are clearly at work in Philippi. Paul planted a church in Philippi by penetrating key social strata in the city. God carefully moved Paul and his team into the right places with the right people.

Paul took his young protégé, Timothy, and Silas on a missionary trip to what he thought was going to be Asia. But the mysterious, supernatural work of God changed Paul’s plans. Luke reported Paul and Timothy were “kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.”⁹ And so Paul and Timothy chose Plan B. Yet “when they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.”¹⁰ Paul, Timothy, and Silas were willing to go—that was their part—but the “sending” was supernatural—that was God’s part.

⁴ Malcolm McDow and Alvin Reed, *Firefall: How God Has Shaped History Through Revivals* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1997), 278.

⁵ Jack Dennison, *City Reaching: On The Road to Community Transformation* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 106.

⁶ *The Holy Bible*, Ephesians 3:20.

⁷ “Speakers Jaime Lerner: City Evangelist,” Ted.com, http://www.ted.com/speakers/jaime_lerner.html.

⁸ *The Holy Bible*, Jeremiah 29:7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Acts 16:7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Acts 16:8.

A city can be transformed when leaders embrace the necessity of God's involvement in the process. The God who has sent you to your city doesn't stop sending once you arrive. You can never figure out exactly where to go and what to do; God's leadership is seldom intuitive. Neither can you transform a city by simply doing the "right" things.

David Garrison explains the need for God's involvement in our missionary task: "We pray because our vision exceeds our abilities. Prayer is the soul's deepest cry of rebellion against the way things are, seeing the lost of this world and crying out, 'This does not glorify God, and so, by God's grace, it must change!'"¹¹

The Vision: A Transformed City

The vision for a transformed city is the foundation of the mission. The mission defines how disciples live out the vision for a transformed city daily. The key to "our part" of God's transforming work in a city is mobilizing transformed people into lost culture and collaborating with others who do the same.

As we make and deploy missionary disciples, clear targets are mission critical. We must consider the where, what, and who of the mission. Geographically, exactly where are we taking responsibility for every man, woman, and child hearing and seeing the Good News? Culturally, what three things need to change the most in our geography? Strategically, who are the key relational networks in our geography? Who are the leaders who will help mobilize missionary disciples there? The initial steps to transforming a city all emerge from discovering the answers to these questions.

Where? Circle of Accountability (COA)

A COA is a specific focus that answers these questions: Where are we mobilizing people? How will we build conversation, culture, and conviction around the people we are committed to reach?

Where we've seen successful transformation, there is always a clarity of geography that produces a missionary awareness of who and how many are in their circle. Mohammed, a believer for only hours, had a profound commitment to his geography. He could not leave until he took responsibility for sharing the Good News with every man, woman, and child in his village.

A great question for a church planter or pastor is, "If your ministry failed or ended in your current church, would you be tempted to stay in your city out of love for the people?" The same question is valid for your everyday disciple working in the marketplace. How many leaders do we have who love their city more than their church? How many leaders do we have who are lead missionaries more than lead pastors? Often our commitment and convictions are more centered on our churches than the geography around us.

Defining a tangible geography where we take responsibility for every man, woman, and child is a mandatory step. A clear and tangible commitment to a defined geography is the key to reaching the people who are toughest to reach. Transformation comes about by knowing the hard ground around us (even if we'd rather not) and taking responsibility to embody the Good News there.

What? Digging Wells

Practical places where a city needs change are places to "dig a well." Like many third-world countries that need fresh water, all people in all cities have complex problems. One way to discover places to dig wells in your city is to ask this question: If the gospel was unhindered in your geography and people readily embraced Jesus, what three things would change the most?

In your answer you will find one or more places to start digging wells for the Good News. The brightest lights for the gospel are usually found in the areas in culture that need change the most.

Tim Keller said that the brightest lights for the gospel in Manhattan are disciples living out biblical sexuality, biblical finances, and biblical power (influence leveraged for others). Why? Because in that culture the three things that most need to change are sex, money, and power. Disciples glorify God by demonstrating countercultural lifestyles where they are desperately needed.

The key to mobilizing people effectively is determining where they need to go. The question is not only where to take responsibility to mobilize, but what we will commit to mobilize to. If it's racism, family, or money, then the missionary leader engages these areas in culture and makes disciples who are bright lights for the gospel in these areas.

¹¹ David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (Midlothian, VA: WIGTake Resources, 2004), 176-177.

Who? Teams and Networks

Where we have discovered evidence of transformation, missionary leaders have identified, prioritized, and engaged key relational networks in their city. Missionary leadership understood and engaged the “Who?” in their circle. Then they were able to understand and employ the “Who?” of the church.

Teams and networks are keys to mobilizing transformed people in lost culture. Simply find where God is at work in your city. You are not the first person God has sent there, nor are you the first who has been burdened for your people.

The Church of Charleston, South Carolina

Pastors of “rival” churches challenging each other to push-up contests outside the area Wal-Mart was quite the scene. But it was all part of the plan for the churches of Charleston to address collaboratively the needs of 1,400+ children in their area who don’t have homes or families. Their efforts netted over \$100,000 in money and supplies for four area orphanages. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of residents became part of the solution as they donated and purchased supplies.

Events like this are not unheard of, but it was more than an annual event. In Charleston it was just another example of churches being the Church together.¹² These churches do life together with an intentional strategy to bring more expressions of the Church of Charleston into collaborative relationship. Pastors spend time together year-round building trust and relationships, praying for one another as churches, partnering together to plant new churches, sharing facilities, and even “advertising” other churches in the area on their websites.¹³

Where there were once division, mistrust, and competition, there is now increasing Kingdom momentum. The Church of Charleston collaboratively pursues their vision for every man, woman, and child to hear and see the Good News. There’s no desire to form an organization that would compete with current church affiliations. In fact, Paul Rienzo, the pastor of Crosstowne Christian Church in Charleston, said, “I’m sick of going to meetings to hear about someone else’s vision for our city. I want to be part of a family that shares a common vision and is doing something about it.”

A Simple Mission

Start today with a simple mission of mobilizing transformed people into lost culture and collaborating with others who do the same. Below are some initial steps to become part of a transformational movement in your city:

- *Make a list of pastors in your COA and pray for them weekly.* Tell them when you do. See what conversations and relationships develop.
- *Pray for other churches in your weekend gatherings.* Tell them when you do. Help disciples in your church not see just the city but the Church in your city. If the vision is every man, woman, and child in your city—not just growing your church—then every gospel-centered church in your city needs to prosper.
- *Start small and grow a missional cluster from the inside out.* Don’t try to get churches to cooperate for an event early on. That’s consensus-building and won’t last. The target is strategic collaboration that grows from trust and relationships. Start with a few pastors in your circle who share your heart for transformation, mobilization, and collaboration.
- *Ask for real commitment from other leaders.* Agree with pastors that you will all give 10 percent of your time to the city, even if it may never benefit your church directly. Challenge each other to get clarity around transformation and mobilization. Hold each other accountable to live out those targets personally before talking about events and making a “big splash.”

Imagine the possibilities. What God would do for one person in your city, he wants to do for your entire city. Would he do another work like in Mohammed’s village, Wales, or Nineveh? If we can imagine it, God can do even more.

¹² “Love Gave Hope” was another collaborative event. See <http://lovegave.com/>.

¹³ For example, see River Church’s website at <http://riverchurch.com/churchofcharleston/>.