

# Rethinking Local Missions

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Missions often evokes images of crossing geographical and cultural boundaries to share the Gospel in foreign lands. However, it is important to recognize that, for many Christians, the cultural landscape of their own nation has become just as foreign as any overseas mission field. Over the years, the values and beliefs that once shaped traditional church life have shifted dramatically. As a result, engaging with the local culture now requires the same level of adaptability and intentionality as reaching those abroad.

## Generational Shifts and the Growing Spiritual Divide

In many cultures, the legacy of a traditional Christian upbringing has not been successfully passed down to younger generations. This shift has contributed to a widening spiritual divide between older and younger generations, with the latter lacking even a basic familiarity with the core tenets of the Christian faith. As a result of this absence of foundational training, younger people often display greater reluctance when presented with the Gospel and are frequently dismissive. This highlights the growing challenge faced by the Christian church in bridging these spiritual gaps.

## Apostolic Directive

The challenges associated with bridging generational and cultural gaps are not new. In the first century, the New Testament apostles and early church fathers confronted these obstacles head-on. The most notable example is the Apostle Paul's remarkable ability to adapt to the various groups he ministered to.

In 1 Corinthians 9:19-22 (NIV), Paul declares,

*I have made myself a slave to everyone.*

*I became like a Jew.*

*I became like one under the law.*

*I became like one not having the law.*

*I became weak.*

*I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.*

(emphasis added)

Paul's fruitful ministry as an apostolic evangelist and scholar was marked by his ability to find common ground with all those he encountered without exception. These categories of people illustrate the lengths to which Paul was willing to go to share the Gospel of Christ.

For Paul, effective ministry required identifying with his audience's frame of reference, speaking in terms his audience would understand, and presenting the Gospel in a clear and accessible manner with intent, regardless of the inconvenience or personal cost. Ultimately, Paul's approach was about meeting people at their point of need to ensure that the message of Christ was both relevant and transformative across generational and cultural divides.

## Implications for Local Missions

How can the modern church adopt Paul's strategy, especially as they consider their own local mission field?

While the traditional approach of inviting people to church services, commonly referred to as *come-and-see*, is effective for some, it is a hurdle many unbelievers are unwilling to scale today. For those reluctant to attend church gatherings, the church must also embrace the strategy of *go-and-tell*.

One of the most practical ways to implement this strategy of *go-and-tell* is through neighborhood *Bible Discussion Groups*. These groups provide a model for relational engagement, offering a welcoming environment for spiritual dialogue outside of traditional church settings.

## Bible Discussion Groups

Bible Discussion Groups are designed to meet people where they are on their spiritual journey. They offer a safe, welcoming space for people to ask questions, find biblical answers, and learn from one another. As the name suggests, these groups are Bible-based, discussion-oriented, and people-centered.

Unlike traditional Bible studies or life groups—which focus on helping believers *grow* in their faith—Bible Discussion Groups are designed to help people *discover* faith. They serve as a bridge between the secular world and the Christian community, often acting as a steppingstone for individuals to come to faith and assimilate into the life of a local church.

These groups are best led by an *outreach pastor* or lay leader who is trained in the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith.

### Bible Discussion Group Distinctive 1: Safe Places

Creating safe places is a hallmark of Bible Discussion Groups. They become safe places because they are intentionally structured around the following practices:

**Voluntary Participation:** Participation in discussion groups is entirely voluntary. Individuals are invited to join the group with no pressure to contribute immediately. They are free to simply listen and observe, without any expectation to respond, read, or pray. This is a pledge made by the leader to all participants, to ensure that everyone feels at ease and never singled out.

**Mutual Respect:** Participants are more apt to join the discussion once they have experienced the trust and respect of others. The focus is on discovering what the Bible has to say on a topic rather than debating it, and fostering a cooperative and constructive atmosphere. Rules of engagement are established to guarantee that every participant is treated with the utmost respect, further contributing to a positive and inviting group dynamic.

**Location Neutrality:** The choice of meeting location plays a significant role in creating a safe space. Bible Discussion Groups often gather in neutral locations where participants can interact comfortably and without intimidation. These are locations where people outside the church are accustomed to meeting socially, such as homes, coffee houses, school campuses, and youth or senior centers. Meeting in these neutral locations allows individuals to be themselves and feel at ease, promoting open and authentic discussion.

By implementing these safety measures, individuals are encouraged to move from being curious observers to active listeners and participants.

### Bible Discussion Group Distinctive 2: People-Centered

Bible Discussion Groups are fundamentally people-centered, not curriculum-centered. The primary purpose of these groups is to help individuals address and overcome their personal sticking points—concerns and misconceptions—regarding the Christian faith. Therefore, the selection of discussion topics is determined by the felt needs and questions raised by those in attendance.

The life and ministry of Jesus epitomize this people-centered approach. In his interactions with Israel's elite and everyday people, Jesus consistently responded to their deepest concerns in ways they could understand and act upon.

For example, when Nicodemus struggled to comprehend Jesus' identity and mission (John 3), Jesus revealed that the purpose of his divine work as the Son of Man was to offer salvation to the world through his sacrificial death. Similarly, when the Samaritan woman expressed her longing for dignity and purpose (John 4), Jesus offered her eternal life through the Spirit. In each encounter, Jesus met people at their point of need, providing answers that were both relevant and transformative.

### **Bible Discussion Group Distinctive 3: Discussion-Oriented**

The academic community has long recognized that group discussion is a highly effective method for problem-solving, learning, and therapy. As applied to biblical inquiry, discussion groups offer participants a unique opportunity to learn from the collective experiences and insights of others as they encounter and wrestle with God's truth, perhaps for the first time.

Discussion groups make it possible for people not only to hear God's truth but also to *interact* with it. This interaction invites participants to clarify, and perhaps grapple with, what they believe and why they believe it. In doing so, participants begin to connect the spiritual dots and discover the coherence of the Christian worldview and church doctrine.

Leaders thoughtfully integrate the Gospel message into the discussion and conclude with a clear explanation to the Gospel. This practice of relating the Gospel message to the session's theme reinforces the central purpose of Bible Discussion Groups: helping individuals encounter and comprehend the transformative power of God's love and grace. Ultimately, this practice allows individuals to move from confusion to clarity, from skepticism to faith.

### **Bible Discussion Group Distinctive 4: Personal Invitation**

People are much more inclined to attend a Bible Discussion Group when they receive a personal invitation from someone they know and trust, such as a friend, colleague, or family member. This is especially true when the individual extending the invitation accompanies the invitee to the group. The presence and support of a familiar face makes the group experience more approachable.

When launching Bible Discussion Groups, one of the most effective approaches is for a Christian from the church to personally invite an unbeliever from the community. This intentional invitation not only helps bridge the gap between the church and the wider community, but also ensures that the group brings together a balanced diversification of perspectives. This composition enhances the richness of the discussion, allowing for meaningful exploration of faith from different viewpoints.

### **Witness of Christian Community**

In today's world, we see an increasing trend toward isolationism. Many individuals avoid personal confrontation and rejection, especially in this era marked by civil discord. While isolation may offer temporary solace, it ultimately leads to a false sense of peace that cannot truly satisfy the longings of the human heart.

To address this growing trend, it is essential for the Christian church to intentionally welcome and enfold the unchurched into Christian community. By doing so, individuals are given the opportunity to witness firsthand the transformative power of God at work among believers. This is an excellent example of how believers can cooperate with the Holy Spirit in His work of drawing people to himself.

Bible Discussion Groups serve as a vital tool in this process. They decentralize and expand the churches' reach into every segment of society. They provide a safe haven for people to hear, discover, and respond to the Gospel of Christ. They encourage participants to examine their own beliefs in light of God's Word, allowing them to thoughtfully submit to the authority of God's Word. Ultimately, the goal is to lead people to place their trust in our loving and merciful triune God.

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