

In the introduction in the last issue I noted that every generation faces new questions and new challenges. But the pace of change in our world is unique in history. Technology, media, urbanization and globalization are unique and powerful forces that impact discipleship and mission.

Furthermore, in the last thirty years our context in Canada has shifted from one where people knew the Christian stories, to one where they do not. We suddenly find ourselves as missionaries in our own culture.

\*\*\*

The first challenge we face as missionaries is to genuinely trust that the Spirit goes before us in the world. Jesus really does “love the world,” (John 3:16), and just as Jesus sent the disciples to prepare the way before him (Luke 9 and 10), so now he sends the Spirit to prepare the way before his disciples.

One of the stunning discoveries we made in our time at Metro in Kelowna (a community among the homeless and inner city poor) was that God was at work before we got there. The poor became our teachers, often an example to us of faith and perseverance in trial. Not only did they teach us the rules of the street, frequently they showed us real kindness and grace. We came to them assuming we would be their teachers; their honesty and vulnerability challenged us to be honest with our own doubts and fears.

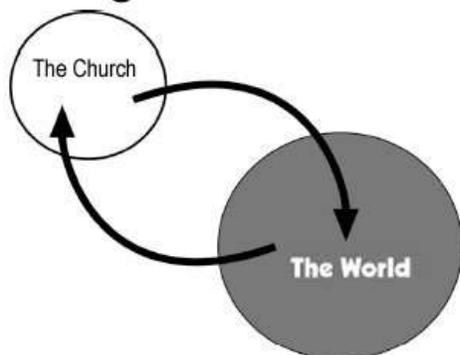
Hanging out with people struggling with addiction and poverty, and often coming with stories of pain and abuse, was intimidating to those whose lives were so “normal.” Most of us were very sheltered, and intentionally avoided contact with people so broken. We learned that we feared our own inadequacy to bring meaningful answers to such need, but some also feared that we would be corrupted by sin and darkness. We failed to hear Jesus words that, “it is the sick who need a physician,” and preferred to hang out with other Christians, others who “had it together.”

But other words of Jesus nagged at us. When he announces his ministry in Luke 4, he states that the Gospel is first “good news to the poor.” We wondered what this would mean in our town? We wondered who would go and be good news in those neglected places? As we read the Gospels, we realized that Jesus was often hanging out with the “wrong kind of people.” Did he not worry that he would be guilty by association? Was he not worried about temptation? (Heb. 4:14-15).

Every generation of believers faces the opportunity to withdraw from the world. Yet in John 17:13-19 Jesus tells us that we are to do TWO things well, and to hold them in tension. He calls us to be IN the world, and he calls us to be not OF the world. “In” but not “of” – what does that look like?

Two Models of the Church in the World

### The "Going" Church



It's helpful to picture these things. Our vision of what is possible is often shaped powerfully by our mental maps.

There are two ways of understanding the way the church will interact with the world around us. Todd Hiestand calls these two ways the “going” church and the “sent” church.

The "Going" church exists separately and on the edge of society. We make forays into the dangerous world, and retreat back into our own fortress for safety and to recharge our batteries. The world is a dangerous place and very risky for believers. We fear corruption and pollution from the world – any contact is a risk.

The "Sent" Church is different. The sent church sees its role as integrated in the wider society. We are "in" the world but not "of" the world.

In this view we exist as salt and light. We are a unique culture, within the cultures of the world.

The world IS a dangerous place, but Christ goes before us. We are called to live within the world to influence -- and to communicate our message by word and deed.

In the first view, the "Going" church, we live in fear. What IS the fear? -- It's this -- *"If I touch someone unclean, then I become unclean."*

We have to wonder -- Why didn't Jesus worry about that one? It's because he saw the world differently. Jesus says, "Not what goes INTO a man defiles him, but what COMES OUT from him makes him unclean." So for Jesus it was *completely different*. For Jesus, if I touch someone "unclean" -- *they become clean!*

So he sends us out. He wants us to spread out -- like SALT and LIGHT, and like LEAVEN. When salt is spread around, it powerfully influences what it touches. Leaven works quietly and in hidden ways. But light in darkness is dramatic: When the Holy Spirit dwells in you, and you touch a broken life, they get healed!

But doesn't this shift the whole purpose of the Church? Sure it does! Jesus did not say, "I came that they might have CHURCH – *and that more abundantly!*" He said, I came that they might have LIFE!

Is THAT our purpose? To carry the life of God out into the highways and byways of the world?

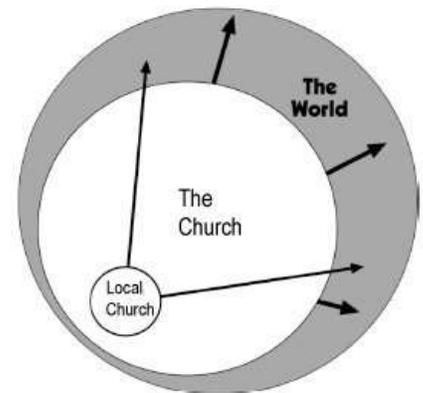
Could it be that when we talk about discipleship we have been measuring the wrong things? That being more spiritual people is only HALF the story?

Our focus on discipleship has come at the cost of God's mission. We have been fairly good at accomplishing church purposes: less good at accomplishing God's purpose. We made the church the center; when Jesus preaches he makes the *kingdom* the center (Luke 4:43). But making ourselves the center is not a discipleship that understands "taking up your cross daily." It is a broken discipleship that takes Jesus as our servant instead of as our Master.

In *The Forgotten Ways*, Alan Hirsch writes about the original meaning of the word *ecclesia*. We translate this word – CHURCH – or, "the called out ones," and think of a gathering for worship. But Paul could have used any number of words if he wanted to talk about a gathering for worship. Probably he would have chosen "synagoge" if this is all he meant. Alan writes,

"An ecclesia was a gathering of wise community leaders, brought together by their common vision for the harmony and well-being of the wider community."

## The "Sent" Church



In other words, to be the sent people of God we will have our neighborhood's best interests at heart. Christians should see themselves as sent by Jesus into the villages of which they are part. To be SENT -- is to participate in what God wants to do -- all around us.

Does that sound familiar? Remember Jeremiah 29:7.

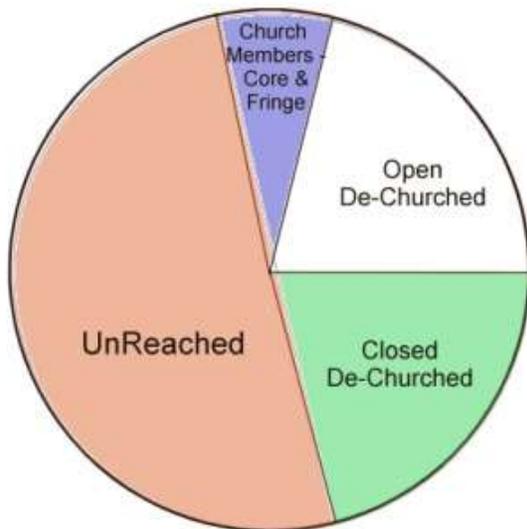
*Seek the SHALOM -- the peace and prosperity -- of the city to which I have carried you into exile.*

*Pray to the Lord for it. If it prospers, you too will prosper.*

### From Christendom to Post-Christendom

A ten year old boy stubbed his toe in a classroom and yelled, "Jesus Christ." The teacher took him aside and told him that was not appropriate. "Why not," asked the boy, "my dad says it." The teacher explained to the boy that Jesus was actually a name for God. The astonished child had no idea -- he had never heard any of the Gospel stories.

One might expect to hear this story of a child, but it is becoming common even for college and University students. We can no longer count on Canadians knowing the Jesus story. The Gospel is losing cultural currency. What are the implications for discipleship and for mission?



Mission Context

First, it means that most churches are competing for a shrinking slice of the pie. Most Canadian churches have relied on transfer growth for membership. ("Put on a better program and they will come"). Only churches under 150 persons in size have much growth by evangelism, and those numbers are declining. We are failing to reach this generation of Canadians.

The Un-reached are the largest group in Canada. But the de-churched are growing rapidly (some are *open*, and can still be reached, others are *closed* because of various hurts). As the percentage of Christians in Canada declines, new churches will have to grow through conversion, and that means they will have to understand the way post-modern Canadians see the world. We will have to speak the language of the changing culture.

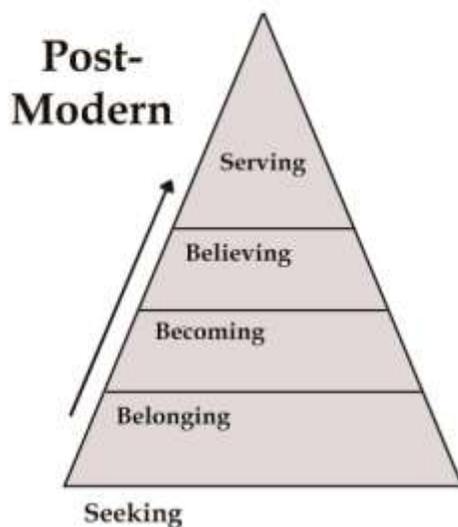
Second, it means no more four-point presentations of the Gospel. The four spiritual laws will have to be retired in favor of friendship and long-term relationships. In a pluralistic society, the Gospel is only one option among many. In order for the Gospel to have appeal, the messengers themselves will have to be the message. Canadians no longer trust authority: too many failed political promises, and too many ad campaigns -- Canadians are media savvy and spin resistant. But we will give an ear to those who care for us -- who demonstrate that their message connects to actual living. Friendship with those outside our faith will become far more important than it has been in the past.

Third, church planting must change. We must move back into neighbourhoods we have abandoned, and we must be prepared to take five years getting to know our neighbours and investing in the communities where we are placed. Because the gospel story has lost currency and is simply not known among a growing group of Canadians, we will have to build social capital by caring for the people and neighbourhoods where we reside. When people see us LIVE the kingdom of God's shalom, they will become open to the message. We must "seek the shalom of the city" we inhabit.

This will be less about meetings and preaching, and more about relationships and giving. It will mean learning the rhythms of the people who live and work in our neighbourhoods. It will mean having coffee at the same shop – buying from the same store – and discovering the needs of the neighbourhood, observing what God is doing in bringing His kingdom, and then partnering with Him. It will mean becoming an advocate for those who have no voice, and sharing what we have with those who have less.

It will mean many shared meals together, especially inviting those who have nothing to contribute (in biblical terms this is true hospitality). It might mean a community garden. It will mean becoming more sensitive to issues of justice in our neighbourhoods, and becoming involved in civic politics to influence change. It will require a new appreciation for diversity and learning the stories of people who see the world in very different ways than Mennonites.

It will mean a shift in the way we think about the process of conversion. In the last generation we emphasized guilt as the entry point for the Gospel. However, in the rising generation (iGens) self-image is so positive that appealing to guilt is pointless. But the Gospel is about more than guilt – Jesus also carried our shame. Shame grows out of a personal sense of failure to achieve one's potential, and iGens keenly feel their need to achieve and complete themselves.



Finally, in the last generation we emphasized belief as the entry point to our communities, and the importance of right belief in order to belong. However, iGens will not take our beliefs seriously until they are loved and accepted. iGens long to belong; they must feel included before they will hear what we believe. Barriers to participate in the life of our communities must be lowered, even as we point to Jesus as the reason for the way we live. (See Stuart Murray's discussion in *The End of Christendom*).

We face many challenges in this cultural transition. Some of the challenges require outward changes – changes in form. Others require changes in behavior – the way we include others, and the way we guard the boundaries of our communities. But perhaps the greatest task is an emotional one: moving into unfamiliar territory creates fear and anxiety. Welcoming those who are different from us may raise fears that we are sacrificing our own identity. But forms must always flex and change – the wineskin is temporary, the wine is always new.

The challenge is to trust Jesus even as we move to unknown places. We can go out confident that the Spirit goes before us.

LINKS -- [The City 2.0](#) // [We Can't Go Back to the Garden](#)  
[Listen to this article.](#)

## BIO



Len lives with his wife Betty in Kelowna, BC, in the heart of the orchards and vineyards of the beautiful Okanagan valley.

Len is co-author of *Missional Spirituality* (IVP: 2011) and author of *The Missional Church Fieldbook* (Urban Loft: 2013). He is an adjunct Professor of ministry at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Chicago, as well as at Tyndale Seminary, Toronto and George Fox Seminary in Portland. His coming book is *No Home Like Place: A Christian Theology of Place* (The House Studio, 2013).