

Connecting With the Lost Through Relationships **Leonard C. Albert**

In the Great Commission, Jesus calls every Christian to step out in faith and spread the Good News. This is faith in action! People who obey this command change their spiritual lives forever! It could be spreading the Good News to a neighbor or moving to another country to reach the people there. It could be sharing with less fortunate kids down the street or spreading the Word in a town two hours away. Wherever we go, every faithful Christian is compelled through obedience to share the Gospel.

Here or There?

Jesus' command in Matthew 28 is clear, "*make disciples of all nations.*" So, for 2,000 years Christ's followers have gone to neighborhoods around the world to share the Gospel. It seems that we have always thought of the Great Commission as being fulfilled in some distant land—a land called "over there." In the minds of many, the people needing to be saved live in a remote jungle, a foreign city, or a strange culture. We tend to think of "world missions" in visions of khaki clad missionaries fighting their way through impenetrable forests. This line of thinking doesn't work in the 21st century. Something has been happening. "The nations" are on the move. The ethnic makeup of neighborhoods in America has been changing. The world has moved in next door.

The publication *Mission America Monthly* says that "the United States is now the third largest mission field in the world—only India and China have more nonbelievers." America is truly a mission field. Consider these facts:

- South Korea, Africa and Asia have the largest church congregations in the world
- The largest Buddhist temple is located in Boulder, Colorado
- The world's largest Muslim training center is in New York City
- The world's largest training center for Transcendental Meditation is in Fairfield, Iowa
- Each year nearly 500,000 students and scholars from virtually every nation on earth are enrolled to begin a four year sojourn in American colleges and universities
- Every day more than 175 different languages are spoken in this country, and millions either do not speak English or have a poor understanding of it.

The challenge of the Great Commission to reach "all the world" can be fulfilled in our neighborhoods. Our new neighbors were born in different cultures, speak different languages and have different values than many of us. Those of us who were not called to be missionaries overseas can now be missionaries in our own zip code! God has brought the nations to our doorsteps and is calling us to serve Him where we live, work and play. Today, more than ever, we have the chance to grasp the full meaning of loving God with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. The big question is, "How?"

How do we love our new neighbors? We can do it through what is being called "relationship evangelism." There is a "mission on your doorstep" and in order to fulfill this mission you must be inspired, informed and equipped to reach the nations living in your own community.

From God's point of view the "there" is now "here." For most of us that means that we are already where we've been sent. The greatest mission field we could ever hope for has arrived right where we reside. God has placed us in neighborhoods and our church in communities all over this nation so that we might make disciples right where we live and work. Thus, not only do we not have

to go elsewhere to fulfill the Great Commission, but in fact our primary mission is here, right on our doorstep, right across the street, right in our schools, neighborhoods, and offices.

Missionary or Minister?

First, a statement of truth: the people of God are the workers God has chosen to partner with Him in reaching the lost and this involved more than church working in the church. There is a vast difference between “church work” and the “work of the church.”

The work of the church is not always in the church—it is *Kingdom* work. The ministry of the laity goes far beyond the four walls of local congregations. Laity need more than just “jobs in the church.” They have been called and gifted by our Lord for ministry in the community as well. The Great Commission doesn’t say, “Go into all the world and make *workers* of all nations *nagging* them in the name of the Lord.” This is what is happening in many churches where pastors feel sad that they can’t get their lay people to get “involved.” We need to take a fresh look at the involvement of the laity in ministry and the concept of “every member a missionary” since the world has moved to our doorsteps.

An easy-to-remember definition of ministry is that it is Christian work that involves the acts, duties and services of every believer where they live, work and worship. Ministry is any human activity that is entered into on behalf of Jesus and His gospel. The word “minister” is not only a noun—it is also a verb! Ministry involves finding and meeting human needs spiritually, socially and physically. We move beyond “talk” and actually “do.” There is a presumption that what we hear, we know. We must gain our knowledge from experience, not just knowing intellectually. Most of our adult lives are spent on our jobs—in our “working world.”

New or Old?

Here in the 21st century we find ourselves in a new world: the world of postmodernism. This is the age of experiential and visual. In this age we are all connected and there are few (if any) absolutes. In just one generation we’ve moved from a “Gutenberg world” to a “Google world!” The printed page is being replaced by the electronic page of e-mails, text messages and the Internet.

There are lost people all around us that are information rich, but upon close examination they are spiritually poor. They need the spiritual wisdom that only God can give them. The challenge is to help change their mind about pluralistic thinking. They believe that there are many ways to God. How do we reach post moderns who believe that “it’s fine for you, but not for me?”

The challenge to reach our current culture has great implications for the evangelical community wanting to be obedient to the Great Commission. When Jesus said, “Go into all the world,” what does that world look like today? Our burden and passion to reach the lost has, and will continue, to cause a clash of cultures. The big question is: how do we connect the timeless message of the past with the postmodern culture of the present in which interest in religion is low, but desire for spirituality is high?

When it comes to culture, Christians generally have one of three attitudes:

1. **We fight it:** We hear generalizations like “Everything in our modern culture is wrong.” Ironically, when we were heavily in the era of modernism, few evangelicals bought into it lock, stock, and barrel. But now that we are past modernism, many evangelicals are longing for the good old days. Change is resisted and the old ways are used—even if they are not working. The ministry of our local churches is sometimes segmented from other parts of our life (business, family recreation etc.) resulting in a disconnect between the church and the community. This is a reality with at least two groups in the church: men and boys. *Man in the Mirror Ministries*, a para-church

group in Florida says that 25% of women in church worship without their husbands and 90% of the boys who are being raised in the church will abandon it by their 20th birthday.

2. **We join it:** We become conformed to the cultural values that surround us. This is NOT where we need to be. We call these groups “cultural churches” because they endorse the culture and blend in with it to the extent that they surrender their core beliefs just to reach others. Churches like this care little for society, think little of missions, evangelism, or social issues that must be addressed by believers. Some “seeker-oriented churches” continually face the temptation to put a priority on relevance over truth. In other words, some church’s willingly “water down the truth” in an attempt to be relevant and conform to the culture.

3. **Connect to it:** In John 17: 14-15 Jesus said, *“I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one.”* This truth is unchanging: we are *in* the world but are not *of* the world. What then do we do with the culture? We do the same thing Jesus did: we engage it! Luke 5: 27-32 tells a beautiful story about Jesus engaging the culture. *“After these things He went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, “Follow Me.” So he left all, rose up, and followed Him. Then Levi gave Him a great feast in his own house. And there were a great number of tax collectors and others who sat down with them. And their scribes and the Pharisees complained against His disciples, saying, “Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus answered and said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.”* The big surprise here is that Jesus would show up for this “great feast.” The reason is because His desire was, still is, and always will be “*to seek and save that which was lost.*” (Luke 19:10). Jesus offered no one charity. He gave Himself. Can we do any less? We have to offer the people of our world today Jesus! Paul never argued that Christ could top the mystery religions and other ecstatic cults in terms of religious experience. He offered the truth – Jesus Christ and him crucified. This was the power of God to which he wanted them exposed.

Cultivate or Reap?

We spread the kingdom by witness, by proclamation of the “Good News.” The Great Commission and evangelism are like handmaidens—they are inseparable. Evangelism involves preparing, training, equipping. It is not so much an event, but a process. This effort takes time and commitment—time to show that believers really care about non-believers (now we call them “pre-Christians!”). This process takes time because it involves building relationships with the unchurched community. Since our current generation is so caught up in “experiential” and “hands on involvement” they will respond better to God’s love if they can see it in action. In the “Google world” of the 21st century it may not be a “Billy Graham” type of landscape with mass revivals in big stadiums. But revival is still a reality! It will show up in our postmodern world through individual believers when they connect with the commission to “go into all the world.” As one church leader recently said, “If we are going to turn the corner for revival in our present day, it is going to be through market place ministry.”

We may not see a lot of “reaping” at first because this process involves a lot of “cultivating.” In all probability it will happen because believers have built personal relationships with unbelievers. They will minister with a goal of “being” the Good News and sharing it verbally. It will be a slow but powerful process of people coming to Christ one by one—or as someone said, “won by one.”

We have to start somewhere, but where? There are so many plans, formulas and programs. They are so many kinds of evangelism. Do we go with confrontational, relational, inquiry, evidential, prescriptive, testimonial or lifestyle evangelism? Where and when do we go? Who goes?

What do we say? How do we begin? There are so many challenges associated with presenting the gospel to every person. There are gated communities, high-rise apartments, and wealthy suburbs that present a challenge that must be overcome. There are the millions who are trapped in the inner cities, mostly without hope, who must be reached with the gospel. We must not only present a clear gospel witness, but follow up with discipleship so that people understand what it means to live out their faith. Not everyone will be saved, but we must make sure that every person is given the opportunity to accept Christ.

We need a plan! Experts say that you will only grow as big as your organizational plan allows. We need a launching point for all of this to happen.

Take a look at our *Take 5* plan! This is a great way to connect with the lost through relationships and friendship evangelism.

Take Five is a plan for the local church to merge small home-based groups with personal evangelism teaching and training. At its core it is a Bible study for believers that prepares and equips them to reach unbelievers.

The strategy consists of five couples and/or singles, who meet in respective homes for about three hours once a month for five months. Each couple focuses on five unsaved or unchurched couples (we call them the “church-detached”) with the goal of reaching out to them with kindness and care in order to eventually help them know Christ and find a church home.

This monthly Bible study includes a fellowship meal, followed by a 20 minute video teaching followed by about 30 minutes of discussion. The evening concludes with a time of prayer and intercession for any special requests of the group and especially the needs of the focus couples. Take Five allows for three vital elements: supper—breaking bread together in homes; soul winning—cutting edge teaching and small group interaction on up-to-date methods of reaching the lost; and supplication—sincere prayer for others that are unchurched or nonbelievers.

Sessions are held in two semesters each year: January to May and August to December but can be started anytime. The sessions follow the academic school year to make it easier on families. Curriculum will be available for four levels of study: personal evangelism, local church ministry, apologetics, and cults and Islam. Each level includes a textbook to study, a DVD to view and a leaders’ guide with discussion questions.

The Take Five Life Groups study book for this semester is the newly published *Share the Gospel in Three Stories* by Leonard Albert. Participants will be blessed during the five teaching sessions where each month the author will be sharing via DVD on powerful ideas, instruction and illustrations on how to do three simple things: listen to their story, talk about your story and tell His story. Students will learn how to connect to the post-Christian culture through lifestyle evangelism using a novel way of sharing the gospel called the “G.R.A.C.E.” outline. They will discover how to use their home as a base for evangelism, how to answer common (and uncommon!) objections, and how to use relationships to lead to friendships to lead someone to Christ. The teaching sessions end with how to engage and assimilate newcomers into the church.

Order the *Take 5* materials from our store on this site!