

WHAT IS A MISSIONAL COMMUNITY?

{ the church has left the building }

introduction

The Vintage Faith Community began in fall of 2004 as a small group driven church. At that time, the vision for growth and impact centered around the Sunday service and the mid-week small group. On Sunday we gathered to hear the gospel proclaimed, to publicly worship God together, and to celebrate communion. During the week we met in homes to share life and journey together in our faith. We ate meals together, studied the Bible, prayed, and worshipped together. It was simple, relational, and often beautiful.

In just a few short years, we've discovered an increasing sense of dissatisfaction with the small group driven model. The dissatisfaction has come from three areas. First, group members were increasingly dissatisfied with the level of relationship and accountability happening in the group – they simply weren't sharing life very deeply. Second, group leaders expressed dissatisfaction with their groups' lack of ownership of the small group. If the leader didn't plan, coordinate, and organize the entire small group, no one showed up and no one planned any alternative. Third, the elders of Vintage became increasingly dissatisfied with the way in which small group often (not always!) became another Christian gathering focused on discussion and conversation but lacking intentional, actual, this-world obedience to Jesus.

Though it was never our intent, the small group seemed to function as a holding unit for Christians while almost everyone believed the mission of the church would take place on Sunday. In other words, the church body saw themselves as supporting the mission by helping with the Sunday gathering.

identity

In order to move forward, we need to return to the good news of the gospel and see what Jesus intended for the church. The gospel is the center of everything we are and do, and could be summed up like this (adapted from Tim Keller, Redeemer PCA): Through the person and work of Jesus Christ, God fully accomplishes salvation for us, rescuing us from judgment for sin into joyful fellowship with him, and then restores the creation in which we can enjoy our new life together with him forever!

This radical reality has 4 specific implications for who we are as God's Church. Each of these implications flows directly from what God has done for us in the gospel. As Christians, we don't do anything to earn God's love, favor, blessing, or forgiveness; rather, God has given those things to us as a gift when he gave up his Son to pay the penalty for our sin and to heal the brokenness of the world caused by our sin.

As you read these 4 implications - what we call our Core Identities - take careful note of how each focuses *first* on what God has done, and then *secondly* on who we are as a result.

First, we are a **Family**: Because God has restored us to himself, forgiven our sin, and removed his wrath from us by placing it on his own Son, we have become children of God, holy and dearly loved by our Father! Therefore, we are God's children and his people in the world, a community that does for each other what God has done for us in Jesus, that the world might taste and see the goodness of our Father.

Second, we are **Missionaries**: Because God has come to restore and redeem all of creation through Jesus, his healing work extends to people, systems, cultures, and all of creation! Therefore, we are God's ambassadors or representatives, sent into our culture by the Holy Spirit, commissioned to proclaim and demonstrate that God is restoring the world to Himself through Jesus.

Third, we are **Servants**: Because God has sent his Son as a sacrificial servant, taking our place on the cross and thereby healing and forgiving us in his substitutionary death, we then are freed from our self-love and self-reliance and empowered by him to serve those around us. Therefore, we model our lives after the Servant-King, increasingly being freed by Him from slavery to self and so empowered to serve others.

Finally, we are **Learners**: Because God has begun this work in us and by His Spirit promises to bring it to completion one day, we recognize the need to continuously be learning together from him and being changed by him. Therefore, we are students and followers of Jesus, learning from him how to live life the way God intended, and helping one another to do the same.

Therefore, the Vintage Faith Community is:

**A Family of God
Sent on mission
Serving our world and
Learning how to live in the way of Jesus
So that the joy of the gospel fills our city!**

Only once we have clarified *who we are in Christ* are we able to define *what we should be about* as a church.

Biblically, the church body does not exist for the sake of helping a Sunday service run smoothly. In Ephesians 4, Paul says that God gives the church leaders – apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers – for the purpose of “equipping the saints for works of service.” Too often the leaders have done little beyond equipping the people of God to “work at the service,” as if the Sunday event was the primary place that the work of the kingdom was to take place.

In reality, Jesus has called and gifted the church with leaders in order that these leaders would turn and equip God’s people to be the missionary force in the world that He intended them to be when he said, “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”

The church is to go into the world and make disciples, a process that requires the leaders spend their time and energy on calling, teaching, equipping, and sending the church into the world and into that task.

Therefore, our small groups are now called “**Missional Communities**.” Though the name is longer and perhaps a bit awkward, it more clearly identifies what God has called us to be about as a

church. **Missional** means that we see ourselves as a missionary people, sent by God into our neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools, blessed to be a blessing. **Community** implies that we will be this people *together*, partnering in order to do the work God has sent us to do in our city and lovingly caring for one another in the process.

What we envision with our Missional Communities is the church of Jesus being taken into the mission field here in Spokane.

We envision the church being so committed to bringing redemption and wholeness to our city that our city begins to ask questions, giving us the opportunity to proclaim Jesus.

We envision people walking in humble obedience to the radical call of Jesus to love our neighbors as ourselves.

We envision Christians pooling their resources and energies for the good of the city, actually making the city a better place to live for everyone, as a testimony to the way God will one day make all things right.

We want to see Jesus' Church doing what it was put here to do rather than just trying to stay afloat, remaining aloof from the culture, or burning people out through churchy programs.

Most of all, we want to see our neighbors come to know and experience the powerful love of God in Jesus, find hope and joy in Him, and join us in this great mission to our city!

If you are a Christian, my guess is that there is something about this that both resonates with you and yet frightens you. Take heart - both are appropriate responses!

definitions

Do you recall the story of the good Samaritan in Luke 10? Jesus told that story in response to a question from someone who was trying to avoid loving his neighbor! When a man was robbed and left for dead along the road, two religious leaders intentionally passed him by. Only a Samaritan - a person considered to be a moral and religious outcast - stopped to care for the man. Jesus concludes his story by asking,

Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise." (Luke 10.36-37)

You. Go. Do likewise. Jesus doesn't mince his words: showing mercy to your neighbor is not optional for those who would claim to follow Jesus! Our Missional Communities intentionally prioritize this responsibility.

However, by using the term "neighbor," we do not necessarily mean the people who live next door! Missiologist Darrel Guder, using Jesus' parable, defines neighbor as "anyone you cannot avoid." Your neighbor is anyone who has needs that you have the resources to meet.

Your neighbor may be those who live next-door, those you work with, those you play with, or those with whom you share some sort of affinity, including your immediate and extended family. Paradoxically, your neighbor may also be someone you have little in common with but whom God has placed squarely in your path or specifically called or commanded you to care for.

As we think about the role each of us is called to be as missionaries in our city, it is imperative that *you* can define and articulate who *your* neighbors are. It is insufficient to say, for example, “I’m called to Spokane.” Spokane is (believe it or not!) diverse, full of people with different needs and different stories. Which of them are you called to? Whose “stories” do you know? Which of them are eating dinner at your table? With whom are you sharing the good news of Jesus?

In other words, who are the people you are called to serve? Don’t overlook the obvious – many of these “neighbors” may live in your house! At the same time, going to your “neighbors” may require you to do things that are way outside your comfort zone!

Here is how we define a **Missional Community**:

A Missional Community is a partnership of Christians for the mission of Jesus to our neighbors, who demonstrate the gospel tangibly and declare the gospel creatively to each other and to the world.

A Partnership of Christians: First and foremost, a M/C is a group of Christ followers who are linking arms, sharing resources, and caring for each other as they go into the world. Together, we are living out our Identities of Family, Missionary, Servant, and Learner. As we go about living out our faith in real and tangible ways, we need a group of people to support and encourage us along the way. A great way to get started with this is to take our Partners in Mission course to learn more about what Vintage Faith believes and the mission we are called to together.

For the Mission of Jesus: The Great Commission given to the early church was the command to make disciples. A disciple is someone who responds in faith to what Jesus has done for them, resolves to actively live in his ways, and calls others to do the same. As disciples, then, we are partnering together in order to help one another and others actually live in obedience to the way of Jesus. We seek to be disciples of Jesus and to help others become disciples of Jesus. Being on mission is nothing more – or less – than being obedient to Jesus: “Go and make disciples!”

To Our Neighbors: Just as the Father sent the Son to a specific time, place, and people, so the Spirit does with the church, sending each of us to specific groups of neighbors. As the above definition of “neighbor” clarifies, we must be able to articulate the specific people we are sent to in order to actually be intentionally serving them.

Demonstrate the Gospel Tangibly: Just as Jesus came demonstrating the kingdom through selfless acts of service, so we actively look for opportunities to meet the felt and real needs of our neighbors so that we become a blessing to them. God has extended blessing and grace to us though we don’t deserve it, so we are empowered to be a blessing to others. A Missional Community regularly plans projects and parties that tangibly bless the neighbors they know and love.

Declare the Gospel Creatively: A M/C must listen to and understand the stories of their neighbors in order to be able to tell the Gospel Story in ways that are Good News. The good news message is full of meanings, implications, and themes that our neighbors need to see and hear. In order to share the Gospel well, we need the humility to listen well to their stories and the courage to tell the Gospel of Jesus clearly, applicably, and winsomely. As we serve our neighbors we'll find opportunities to tell them about God's grace in Jesus.

To Each Other and To the World: God's grace in Jesus is good news for those in the church and those outside the church – no one ever outgrows the gospel! Therefore, we speak the gospel and demonstrate the gospel to one another as a church family and to our neighbors. The Missional Community takes responsibility to make meals for families with new babies, to care for financial and physical needs, to counsel and encourage one another, to help each other move, and any number of other things that the church should do! And, at the same time, the Missional Community purposefully extends beyond themselves to do these kinds of things for their neighbors.

Let's compare and contrast a Missional Community with other small group concepts or church programs.

A Missional Community is not a Small Group. Unlike traditional small group ministries, the Missional Community does not exist primarily for the good of the group itself, but for the mission of Jesus. Likewise, the Missional Community is not one of many other programs at the church; rather, the Missional Community is the basic building block of the church.

A Missional Community is not a Bible Study. While a Missional Community will often study the Bible together, the goal is not simply more Bible knowledge or information; rather, the Missional Community studies the Bible to learn about what God is up to in the world so that they can be better equipped to actively join Him!

A Missional Community is not a Support Group. Our Missional Communities do not exist solely to care for and counsel one another. This is not just a time to hold each other accountable to personal holiness or to support each other in difficult times. All these things are important, but in a Missional Community they happen as we go about tangibly bringing the kingdom to bear on our city. If at times we pull back from that in order to get more healthy in our personal lives, we always do so in anticipation of taking the healing that God is bringing in our lives to the city.

A Missional Community is not a Social Activist Group. While each M/C will often work together on a variety of projects, it is not simply focused on a social cause but about Jesus and his mission in our city. You will certainly have something of a shared burden for the needs of our city, but the Missional Community doesn't seek to simply advocate a cause but to demonstrate and announce the kingdom of God.

A Missional Community is not another Weekly Meeting. A Missional Community is a family – brothers and sisters in Christ – on a shared mission. The gathering of the Missional Community is not simply a committee meeting, and the Missional Community doesn't begin and end with the weekly gathering. A Missional Community shares all of life together through meals, celebrations, sorrows, and trials! We aren't simply meeting to plan and organize projects but to share life together as we go about mission in our city.

Let me sum it up: rather than seeing the Sunday gathering as the front-end of mission and the center of the church, we need to be able to envision the Missional Community as the vehicle of mission and the center of the church, with the Sunday gathering as the time for celebrating God's grace, hearing stories of mission, and being equipped to go back into the mission field.

And all of this, of course, flows out of what *God* has done and who we are as a *result*. So again, the Vintage Faith Community is:

**A Family of God
Sent on mission
Serving our world and
Learning how to live in the way of Jesus
So that the joy of the gospel fills our city!**

being the church

This is simple to write, but goes against almost everything we normally do in the American Church. So what does all this mean for you?

If it sounds like this is a lot more work than you were hoping for, then you've probably read the article right. Many churches define a "faithful Christian" in terms of nickels, noses, and needs: how much you give, how often you show up, and what church programs you use. Obviously, we disagree. Spectator Christianity is not the Christianity of Jesus. You cannot sit on the bench and let others play the game – you must get into the game!

We also recognize that this understanding of the church takes some time to really "get." The best thing to do is to take our Partners in Mission course the next time it is offered and in the meantime get into a Missional Community. You will see this in action there, and you'll start to see how it can come to be reality in your own life.

Another implication of organizing the church around the Mission of Jesus is that you must learn to pray! Because we don't have a ton of internal ministries going on, you have to actually go to Jesus in prayer and ask him to lead you and tell you what to do. You have to be actively connected to Jesus in order for mission to become a reality in your life. Only through prayer will you have your eyes opened to the needs around you and begin to be able to get involved in God's Kingdom work in our city.

One of the weightiest implications of all this is the assumption that you will be leaving to help plant a church gathering - what we call an "expression" - in our city. As our Missional Communities multiply, they will form the core groups for new gatherings of the church around our city. When we get 4 Missional Communities in a general area, we'll consider starting a Sunday gathering - an expression - from that core.

We are committed to planting churches through the multiplication of Missional Communities. The Vintage Faith Community will become a movement of churches across our city - the Vintage Faith *Communities*. We'll have multiple Missional Communities that are deeply imbedded in neighbor-

hoods and among various groups of people being the church in tangible acts of loving service. As these Missional Communities grow, they will become a movement of churches all connected and interrelated, sharing resources, people, and knowledge for the glory of God and the good of our city.

frequently asked questions

This vision of church is rather messy. There are no real maps for it, only signposts that give a general direction. Reading this article will only give you a glimpse of what might be in store for you. Here are some of the most frequently asked questions.

What about community?

Sometimes people hear this and think that we are throwing relationships out the window. It is simply not true. We are not trying to break up your small group or tear you away from the people you have come to love. Our Missional Communities are built on our 4 Core Identities mentioned above: Family, Missionaries, Servants, Learners. A strong Missional Community has a healthy balance of all 4 Identities, meaning you are caring for one another as a Family, bringing the good news to our city as Missionaries, sacrificially blessing one another and your neighbors as Servants, and discipling one another as Learners. You'll often assess how you are doing as a Missional Community by looking at how well you are living out all 4 Identities.

What does it look like on a weekly basis?

This is a difficult question because there is no predetermined plan for a Missional Community! In fact, part of the problem with the church in America is that we are too dependent on programs and events and pastors who tell us what to think and do. Instead, we need to be going to Jesus, the Senior Pastor and Head of the Church, and asking him what we should be about together!

Having said that, let me give you a few ideas of what it *might* look like week to week. If you decided that your mission was to bring the kingdom to your physical neighborhood, and you realized that "good news" to your neighbors would be to encourage the families to slow down and play together, you might do that by hosting a monthly Saturday morning pancakes, crafts, and family games time. As you did that, you'd need to have your Missional Community pray, plan, and lead it with you, so you might spend your time together each week doing just that.

If your "neighbors" are kids from broken homes in West Central, you might serve together at Youth For Christ by mentoring kids and being involved in the Club night outreaches. Your missional Community might meet before or after Club to care for each other and pray for the ministry of YFC.

Briefly, here are some other ideas:

- Adopt a local service agency and serve together on a regular basis
- Choose a local school to serve at together through supply drives, clean-up, tutoring, etc.
- Adopt a convalescent home in your area and regularly go there to listen, pray, and love
- Get involved with graffiti clean-up efforts in the downtown core
- Get some roommates and move into a specific neighborhood and find ways to create beauty
- Get involved with local music and arts venues to bless the artists and encourage more great local art

When and how often you gather will be determined by your neighbors' and your own needs and resources. We often encourage busy people to take one Sunday a month off from the gathering

and use that time to connect with your neighbors through shared meals, outdoor recreation, or work projects. Just be sure to come back the next week and let everyone know how it went!

What about normal folks like me? This sounds like it is something for pastors or missionaries or other “Super Christians.”

All of us are on a mission of some sort - the only question is, “Whose mission are you on?” As a Christian – the normal kind! – you’ve been given the Holy Spirit, God’s sending agent in the world! If you are walking in the Spirit of God, actively pursuing obedience, you will (in some ways) naturally be on mission already. God uses normal people to do his work in the world. In fact, this whole way of understanding the church takes the focus off of the few “super pastors” and puts the focus on the “normal” Christians. Single people, working dads, busy stay-at-home moms, and students are central to God’s kingdom work in our city!

What if I just want to go to church?

First, we recognize that many newcomers to Vintage have been wounded by crazy church politics and burned out by religious activity. Sometimes you need to take a season and just “go to church,” be with God’s people, sit under the teaching of the Word, and let God refresh your soul. If that is where you are at, please know that our deepest desire for you is that you’ll experience personal renewal and a new-found joy in the gospel. So come, be here, worship with us. Let's talk about Jesus together. We want you to feel the freedom to do that without without feeling the need to do or be or accomplish. We just want to invite you into this journey with us and we want to respect your need to consider all of these things thoroughly.

Second, what we are talking about in this article is deeply rooted in what we believe about Jesus. We don’t believe that you can do any of this effectively or for the long-term without a deep, life-transforming experience of God’s grace. Grace is the center of Christianity and mission flows from living relationship to Jesus. If you are moved into mission for any reason other than the love of Jesus to you, stop! Mission is what happens when our lives are saturated with the love of God, and that happens as we grasp the reality that He loved us so much he gave his own Son for us! As that truth melts your heart, it also rearranges your priorities, and frees you to give your life to a be blessing to others.

Finally, you should be aware that the idea of “going to church” is not a New Testament idea. Jesus did not start a movement that was only intended to put on a good Sunday show for the saints. Jesus gathered a group of people to himself, trained them, and sent them into the world to make disciples of him. He didn’t commission them to build a building or put on an event each Sunday morning! He sent them into the world to be salt and light: a grace-proclaiming, servant people for the fame of Jesus!

This doesn’t seem like a normal church. Are you guys a cult or something?

Most people who first come to our Sunday gathering have a “go to church” mentality. If that is you, know that you are a normal North American Christian. At the same time, you should know that North American Christianity is not normal! If you were to visit the underground church in China, the fastest growing church in the world, rather than million dollar buildings, slick services, and an over-emphasis on Bible information, you would discover people being the church in radically world-changing ways without formal training, buildings, or even complete Bibles. But God is at work, people are dependent on him, and they are dedicated to the Great Commission! They are much closer to the “historical norm” for Christianity! We are classically reformed, orthodox, Bible-believing Christians trying to faithfully live in God’s kingdom in our city. We are a church on mission!

Why should I want to be involved in a Missional Community?

Simply, because the church is the Missional Community. This is how you get cared for and encouraged and mature in your faith. If you only come on Sundays, you'll be disappointed in your experience and likely frustrated by the lack of care you receive, not to mention that you'll miss out on the adventure of *being* the church. Many Christians are burned out on programs that do little more than maintain the institution. By getting involved in a Missional Community, you are fulfilling the Great Commission ("Go and make disciples!") and doing it in a Great Commandment ("Love God, Love others!") kind of way. This is Vintage Christianity!

How can I lead a Missional Community?

We are always in need of more men and women to lead our Missional Communities. There is a ton of kingdom work to do in our city and we need you to help us and let us help you. To lead a Missional Community, you need to first take our Partners in Mission course and actually be involved in a Missional Community. Express your desire to your Missional Community leaders. As they think you are ready, they'll hand off more responsibility to you, encouraging you to own your personal mission and call people to join you in it. Eventually you will be able to launch out from that Missional Community to start a new one. Before you do so, you'll also want to take our Servant Leadership Training course to prepare you for the responsibility of leadership in the church and mission.