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Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Practicing Missional Hospitality at a Suburban Church

Kevin Stewart

Abstract: *The West Houston Church of Christ is typical of many churches in North America that have lost their ability to relate in meaningful ways to the culture around them. Over thirty years West Houston changed from a small, vibrant young church with a thriving family-like atmosphere to a large church that had lost its family connections and was struggling to find a new identity. In this article I discuss the ingrained sense of family that has served as the identity of West Houston and explore both theological and practical ways—specifically those involving missional hospitality—through which a church can navigate the uncharted waters of cultural change that we see all around us.*

I believe that the West Houston Church of Christ¹ is typical of many churches in North America that have lost their ability to relate in meaningful ways to the culture around them. Over a period of thirty years, West Houston changed from a small, vibrant young church with a thriving family-like atmosphere to a large church that had lost its family connections and was struggling to find a new identity. Demographics changed, bringing greater socio-economic, religious, and racial diversity into the congregation. West Houston is not effectively assimilating these new groups into its family. The challenge of forging a close-knit body of believers in face of a changing and diverse cultural environment will require a rethinking of both our theology and our praxis. Having served at this congregation as its executive minister, I discuss in this article the ingrained sense of family that has served as the identity of West Houston and explore theological and practical ways in which a church can navigate the uncharted waters of cultural change that we see all around us.²

¹ Hereinafter referred to as West Houston.

² This article condenses a project thesis I wrote at Abilene Christian University. Kevin Stewart, “Cultivating the Practice of Missional Hospitality for Small Groups at West Houston Church of Christ” (DMin thesis, Abilene Christian University, 2010). Available at https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/dmin_theses/14/.

Description of a Suburban Ministry Context

When I arrived in June of 2012 as West Houston's new executive minister, I spent four months interviewing over fifty leaders from within the church. A recurring theme I heard was that West Houston had lost its sense of community and no longer felt like family. Some of the phrases I heard during the interviews included (1) "We are disconnected." (2) "We don't know each other anymore." (3) "We lost our community." (4) "We don't do things as a family like we used to." Members expressed a need to recapture the family-like atmosphere of the past.

Beginning Life as a Family

Since the congregation's beginning in 1982, the family metaphor has featured prominently in the language of West Houston Church members. Several young marrieds started West Houston and began meeting in Bear Creek Elementary School. Bear Creek was located in the rapidly expanding Copperfield subdivision in northwest Houston. West Houston grew from just a few families to over two hundred in the first two years. The church attracted many young and energetic families, most of whom were educated, white, and high achievers. These families quickly bonded and began "doing life" together as one extended family.

Early Practices of Family Life

Church picnics, work days, Easter egg hunts, fall festivals, and pot luck fellowships formed the habitual lifeline events attended by the majority of members. Every long-time member I spoke with talked about the close family-like atmosphere that had been abundant in all their gatherings. West Houston children loved to attend these events and through them became very close to each other. Several members said that they had raised their children together as one large family. Church activities were important family rituals, but they also became the way West Houston socialized new family members. Many times members told me that people who visited West Houston joined the church because they were drawn in by the loving family they had experienced.

Extending the Family

When I interviewed church members concerning past family practices, they reflected nostalgically on the days when attractional events such as VBS and church picnics were effective at reaching the lost for Christ. Often they cited the story of a young couple who lived near the church and

were invited to one of the church picnics by neighbors. The couple was living out of wedlock, but graciously no one ever mentioned this. Instead the church showed them unconditional love, studied the Bible with them, and converted them to Jesus. Once converted, they made the decision to get married. This story has taken on mythic proportions in the church body and is held up as a model for how the West Houston family is compelled by love to reach others. West Houston viewed family as the way that all aspects of a church's mission are carried out, including reaching the lost.

West Houston members perceived that the church was very effective in reaching into its community during its first seventeen years. Most of this is based on the fact that West Houston grew numerically during that time. Numerical growth was a constant from 1982 to 1999, growing from a few families to over seven hundred in attendance. Although members believed the numerical growth was a sign of effective outreach, most of the numerical growth was due to members of the Churches of Christ who moved into the Copperfield area. However, there were enough stories such as the one above to keep the congregation satisfied that God was also using West Houston to reach the lost.

Disrupting the Family-Like Atmosphere

Difficult parking and crowded services seemed like a sure sign that God was calling West Houston to build a larger building so that it could continue its growth trajectory. West Houston decided to build a new building a few miles down the road on a piece of land that was surrounded by future housing development projects. In 2005 West Houston moved into a brand new thirteen million dollar facility with a worship center that could seat one thousand. The church expected that they would resume growing now that they were not limited by facility space. Instead, the church plateaued and the family ties that had effectively held them together for so long began to deteriorate.

Waning Family Gatherings

What changed? The move had unintended and unforeseen consequences. Previously the church members were also the janitors, the landscapers, the painters, and the repairmen. Work days and other projects are fondly remembered as key ways the family grew close and spent time together. Once West Houston arrived at its new location, it began hiring out all of its landscaping and building maintenance. In addition, all the exterior doors and thermostats were operated by computer so that it was unnecessary to have humans involved in these processes. One other factor

is that the core group that organized church events became empty-nesters, who travel often and feel less need for large family gatherings. There are new young couples being attracted to West Houston, but many of them are from different religious and sociological backgrounds and have not easily assimilated into the church. As a result, the church has lost a vital body-life practice. Losing key church-family practices has created anxiety among long-time members and led to an identity crisis at West Houston.

Changing Demographics

The transient nature of urban life has led to a large turnover at West Houston and adversely affected family-life practices. Many former core members have moved away and new members moving in tend to be Sunday morning only attendees, resulting in their not connecting with the church as a whole. For long-time members, this means they know a smaller percentage of those attending the church. This has naturally resulted in disorientation. In addition, the new members at West Houston are much more diverse. There is a growing African American and Latino population. Previously, when the church was homogeneous, it was very easy to have a strong sense of family. All twelve of the West Houston elders are white and among twenty-two deacons, there is one Latino deacon and one African American deacon. Attempts have been made to recruit African Americans to become deacons or ministry leaders, but they have not been very successful. A few of the church's small groups are beginning to reflect the diversity that we see in worship on Sunday mornings, but most of them are exclusively white. Integration has been difficult, and diversity has eroded the former familiar identity of the church.

Failure of Attractional Events

West Houston's previous outreach efforts have primarily focused on attractional events. Attractional models seek to organize big events that draw large numbers of guests into the building or to a church activity with the hope that these guests, once exposed to the church, will be enticed to visit further. Some of attractional events that West Houston has utilized for outreach are: (1) Vacation Bible School (VBS), (2) Celebrate Jesus (live dramatic reenactment of the life of Jesus at Christmas), (3) Upward Sports, and (4) Fall Festival. These events have attracted a large number of outsiders and thus have served as reasonably effective attractional tools. While it is possible that some of the guests attending these events have ended up becoming members at West Houston, I have been unable to find

evidence that supports it.³ Though these attractational events draw large crowds, relationships are not being built with the attendees. Ramped up attractational events are requiring increasing numbers of volunteer hours and are burning out core members. These events are not creating the type of authentic community needed to maintain West Houston's family values or to accomplish God's mission of reaching the lost.

North American Cultural Context

As an attractational church in suburban Houston, West Houston must change its practices to assimilate those whom God brings within its doors. However, there is also a growing need to recognize that the church must grow beyond attractational events if it is to truly reach the lost in the rapidly changing North American culture. The Christian church is accustomed to being at the center of American culture and to having people seek it out for answers. However, North America has become pluralistic and the church is no longer viewed as the primary social "chaplain to the culture."⁴ In addition, there are a growing number of Americans who no longer affiliate with organized religion.⁵ All this indicates that North America is a growing mission field and that an increasing number will not seek answers to their life problems from the Christian community.⁶ Gallup polling also shows that confidence in organized religion is at an all-time low.⁷ Thus the lost are less likely to be attracted to the church.

Missional Hospitality

West Houston's model depends on the lost seeking out the church. If West Houston is going to reach the lost from its surrounding community in today's context, it will need to reclaim a missional identity by going to the lost and offering them community, which is a practice I identify as missional hospitality. North America is a mission field and churches need

³ I interviewed the staff, looked at the data on new members, and talked to the elders and other key members in the spring of 2015, but I was unable to identify a single member that had come to West Houston through these attractational events in the last eight years. In addition, I could not find evidence of any friendships that had been started with community attendees to these events.

⁴ Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 78.

⁵ Putnam's research indicates that 17% of the United States' population chose "none" when asked for their religious affiliation. This is now the third largest category after Evangelical Protestant and Catholic. See Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 17.

⁶ Reggie McNeal, *Missional Communities: The Rise of the Post-Congregational Church* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2011), 16.

⁷ Lydia Saad, *US Confidence in Organized Religion at Low Point* (Princeton: Gallup, 2012), <http://www.gallup.com/poll/155690/Confidence-Organized-Religion-Low-Point.aspx>.

to recapture the practice of missional hospitality to actively seek out and reconcile the lost to God.

Missional hospitality is also needed to maintain the cohesiveness of the church body at West Houston. I have discussed how the sense of family at West Houston has deteriorated and the body has lost relationality and traditional family practices in light of the changing demographics of the congregation. At West Houston new members join the church, but often fail to connect with others in a relational way. Though new members are attending Sunday morning services, they are not forming relationships in which they can meaningfully share all aspects of life in community. Authentic hospitality facilitates the opportunity to address the deeper needs of humanity within a relational setting.⁸ New members and some long-time members are not easily finding authentically hospitable community at West Houston.

Small groups have been targeted as a key way to assimilate newcomers into the family life of the church. However, West Houston promotes its small groups by offering public invitations to join these groups. Small groups cannot expect disconnected members to contact them, but must reach out relationally with personal invitations to members who are not in small groups. In my Doctor of Ministry thesis, I proposed missional hospitality as a theological practice to help small groups at West Houston extend authentic Christian community to all of its members.⁹

West Houston's growing and diverse community is a very different context from the homogenous environment that gave birth to this church over thirty years ago. There is a need to rethink the church's mission for the present context.¹⁰ People today are seeking authentic community in which they can form relational bonds.¹¹ If missional communities are to offer authentic community, they will have to develop the practice of missional hospitality. Missional hospitality opens up small groups to relationship with each other and extends that relationship to others outside of their own circle.

⁸ Newman lists the following as distortions of hospitality: 1) sentimental hospitality, 2) privatized hospitality, 3) hospitality as a mode of marketing, 4) hospitality as inclusivity, 5) homeless hospitality. Sentimental hospitality is sort of a "good-old-boys" hospitality. Privatized hospitality focuses on "beautiful homes, delicious dinners, and polite conversations." Hospitality as a mode of marketing appeals to a consumeristic mentality. Hospitality as inclusivity makes diversity "without expectations" to be the aim of hospitality. Homeless hospitality fails "to reflect the home or place of Christian hospitality." Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), 19-40.

⁹ Kenneth Stewart, "Cultivating the Practice of Missional Theology."

¹⁰ Patrick Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era* (St. Paul: Church Innovations, 2006), 22.

¹¹ Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 10.

Culture, Context, and Change

West Houston needs to experience a cultural transformation if it is to effectively develop the practice of missional hospitality. There is a big difference between cultural and technical change. Technical change leads to new forms and systems. Cultural change seeks to transform values and attitudes. Small groups are making technical changes. The adult discipleship minister renamed them “missional communities.” He enrolled almost all of the small group leaders in a half-day training to emphasize the role of missional communities in West Houston’s new vision. However, it will take more than a new name and a new organizational plan for lasting changes to occur. If West Houston is to be successful in implementing the practice of missional hospitality, it will need to adopt new values and practices.¹² Small groups will need to be less focused on themselves and develop a passion to reach out relationally to others. This will require a cultural transformation. I believe that West Houston can be transformed through fresh theological reflection on God’s missional nature, combined with actual practice of missional hospitality.

A Theology of Missional Hospitality

Missional hospitality is a fundamental practice of the triune God. In fact, hospitality is experienced among the Trinity as they accept, honor, and relate one to another. Thus missional hospitality initiates in the life of the Trinity and is an extension of the divine life to the world through the believing community. Hospitality welcomes others into divine community in a way that addresses deep human needs such as “physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of human existence and relationships.”¹³ The use of the word “missional” in relation to hospitality is an attempt to rethink the practice of hospitality in light of its missional character.¹⁴ The Trinity seeks to reconcile and embrace all of humanity through the practice of missional hospitality. God forms Christian community and extends this community to others through missional hospitality. Likewise, the church must be deeply engaged in the practice of missional hospitality within its own body and in the surrounding community in order to facilitate reconciliation.

¹² Keifert, *We Are Here Now*, 39.

¹³ Pohl, *Making Room*, 6.

¹⁴ While there has been much written concerning missional theology and hospitality individually, there is a need to more fully reflect on hospitality as a fundamental dimension of the missional Trinity. Studying hospitality on its own merit is valuable, but grounding it in the missionary character of the Trinity deepens and broadens one’s perspective of hospitality and potentially shapes the life of those seeking to reflect God to the world.

Missional hospitality is a necessary practice to reconcile the lost with God and to maintain relational cohesiveness in the church body.

Jesus' "reception of hostile humanity" into Trinitarian community is a model for how Christian community should embrace others through hospitality.¹⁵ The purpose of missional hospitality moves beyond the indoctrination of a Christian belief system in others. God practices missional hospitality to forge relational community with humanity. The relationality of God will be at the center of all efforts to practice missional hospitality because this practice is part of God's identity. God's life within his people through the Holy Spirit similarly propels them into community to offer relationship with others through the practice of hospitality.

Christians must be willing to open up their lives to each other and the strangers around them. Christian love does not keep others at arm's length; it welcomes them into the family life of the faith community. Christian communities should not expect that others will be interested in the gospel outside of a loving and relational connection. I am proposing missional hospitality as a way for a church to reimagine and reenergize relational-building activities in order to more fully participate in God's work of building and extending Christian community.

Hospitality Happens in Community

Hospitality cannot be offered authentically at arms' length, but instead invites the "other" into community where these significant needs can be met. Hospitality can be thought of as a "bridge that connects our theology with daily life and concerns."¹⁶ Jesus models missional hospitality by extending his ministry beyond teaching in the synagogue to walking in the streets and spending time in people's homes. Conversation, acceptance, personal challenge, the meeting of physical needs, and the bestowal of self-worth characterize the missional hospitality of Jesus.

The relationality of the Trinity is understood fully only in terms of community because there are three divine persons that form the triune God (John 10:38).¹⁷ Yet modernity's emphasis on individualism encourages people to think of their salvation as an individual event. Such a notion might lead people to believe they can live out their salvation in isolation from others. Christianity, though, cannot be isolated to individual salvation and personal experience because this is inconsistent with the nature of the

¹⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 100.

¹⁶ Pohl, *Making Room*, 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

Trinity. Church, reflecting the nature of God, should be understood in terms of community. Thus salvation brings one into divinely established community, where relationality is experienced. Salvation offered in Christianity cannot be separated out from the kingdom community or from the divine practice of hospitality that holds the community together.

Transformation – Community requires a “staying power” to effect transformation in people’s lives. Transformative relationships are formed as individuals interrelate over a long period of time with each other within a group setting. These new social relations are not just an “implication” of salvation but are “precisely that which is offered as salvation.”¹⁸ Therefore, salvation and its benefits are fully experienced only within the newly found relations within a community that reflects Trinitarian relationality. Heuertz and Pohl confirm this finding, reporting that to build the type of relationship that will be transformative in the lives of the poor requires living in community with them for years.¹⁹ “New patterns of kinship and social relation” are not found in individual relations, but are formed and reinforced in the context of a committed community.²⁰

Small Groups – Community is where one finds the fullest expression of God’s kingdom. Large churches have difficulty in creating the relationality necessary to constitute authentic community. Authentic community demands settings in which people can share life together, but this does not easily happen during a formal worship in a large building. Even classroom settings do not foster the type of openness and sharing that typifies close community. When church communities extend beyond formal buildings into households, they create the type of hospitality and personal interaction that is necessary to create communal relationships that “transcend social differences.”²¹ The goal of missional hospitality is to foster kingdom communities in small group settings.

Creates Solidarity – Solidarity is the way that missional hospitality accomplishes its goal of creating authentic relational community. Solidarity involves a sharing of life, suffering, and death with others. God takes on flesh and suffers with humanity to show his solidarity with creation (Phil. 2:6-8; Heb. 2:18; 4:14-15). The church seeks solidarity with its self and others by sharing in the sufferings of Christ (Phil. 3:10). God’s Spirit is at work in this process by bringing together a new group of people, who share each

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Christopher L. Heuertz and Christine D. Pohl, *Friendship at the Margins: Discovering Mutuality in Service and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 28.

²⁰ Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), 78.

²¹ Pohl, *Making Room*, 56.

other's suffering in solidarity.²² Paul says it thus, "rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Rom. 12:15).

Everyday Life – Everyday life is where people struggle to keep their marriage together, raise their children, keep their jobs, overcome prejudice, dispel doubt, and face countless other challenges. Thus missional hospitality cannot be confined to church buildings or homes, but must seek solidarity in the traffic patterns of everyday life. Solidarity is found when people eat together, work together, play together, are sad together, and learn together. Solidarity happens when life, in its rich and challenging diversity, is shared in community. Solidarity gives the depth necessary to authenticate relational connections within community. Conversely, without solidarity one cannot experience authentic community.

Self-Giving – Solidarity cannot be structured as much as it is sought by giving ourselves to others for the purpose of receiving them into "divine communion."²³ Solidarity is not easily accomplished programmatically, but occurs when people make room for relationships in their personal lives. Church programs, if they are to be helpful, must focus on the need for members to be transformed into the type of "social agents" or "selves" that Christians need to be in order to offer solidarity and community to another.²⁴ Heuertz and Pohl report that "people are transformed when someone is willing to listen to their stories, to share a meal with them, and to find their insights and concerns important or interesting."²⁵

Modern culture poses a challenge to the authentic giving of one's self that leads to solidarity with another. Modernity's emphasis on the individual tends to breed a self-centered pursuit of happiness and self-absorption, by definition, leaves little room for others.²⁶ Christians are not to "claim the comfort of the Crucified while rejecting his way" of giving oneself to others.²⁷ Such a way of life advocates "not only cheap grace, but a deceitful ideology."²⁸ Instead, God gives up God's own self on the cross in order to make room for solidarity with others. Through baptism, Christians experience a dying of the self so that they can be "de-centered" away from self and "re-centered" on Christ (Rom. 6:1-7).²⁹ Dying to self

²² Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John Hoffmeyer (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1994), 57.

²³ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 23.

²⁴ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 20-21.

²⁵ Heuertz and Pohl, *Friendship at the Margins*, 80.

²⁶ Welker talks about how the pursuit of individualism leads to self-focus and a fleeting attempt to find meaning within one's self. This sort of narcissistic approach is contrasted with the self-emptying approach of the cross. Welker, *God the Spirit*, 35-37.

²⁷ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 24.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

creates the room necessary in one's life to seek solidarity with others. God modeled this "other-centered" life by giving up God's own self to seek solidarity with humanity (Phil. 2:5-8); Christians are likewise transformed into social agents that practice self-giving through missional hospitality to forge authentic Christian community through solidarity with others.

Meals – Meals are often the location where the values of missional hospitality can be seen and solidarity can be experienced. Jesus' characterization of the kingdom in the parable of the great banquet in Luke 14 is appropriately centered on a meal. Meals provide the opportunity for dialogue between hosts, guests, and strangers, which is a critical practice of missional hospitality. Meals also bring people together in a place where kingdom values can be experienced and lived out. This is why Jesus spent much of his missional ministry eating meals in the homes of others. At its inception, the church adopted Jesus' practice of communal meals (Acts 2:42-47). Communal meals offer the opportunity for Christians to subvert the worldly distinctions of class and race (Gal. 3:26-28). When Christians eat together in unity, without the cloak of worldly status, one sees a present foretaste of the kingdom of God that Jesus describes in Luke 14.³⁰

Meals are an excellent way to provide the setting needed for missional hospitality to occur. Modern factors such as technology and suburban living make it much easier to live without the type of relationality necessary to build authentic community.³¹ People have become too spread out geographically and—through the use of technology—are able to navigate much of their life without the necessity of building deep relationships. The practice of missional hospitality, however, cannot happen over "long distance;" instead it requires a place to "dwell in order to participate faithfully" in relationship.³² Large church gatherings bring people together, but often lack the informal and relaxed environment needed for a small group of people to experience authentic relationship. Meals provide the context necessary for the building of a relational community centered on kingdom values. In Pohl's research on the practice of hospitality, she reports that a "close look at contemporary communities and at their ancient counterparts reveals important commonalities. The practice of hospitality almost always includes eating meals together."³³

My own practice of missional hospitality has also confirmed the important role meals play in breaking down social barriers. Over two years

³⁰ Pohl, *Making Room*, 30.

³¹ Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 34.

³² *Ibid.*, 33.

³³ Pohl, *Making Room*, 12.

ago I formed a small group diverse in age, social class, and race that meets together regularly for a meal and to share God's word. The group is primarily made up of minorities: 50% Latino, 30% African American, and 20% Caucasian. All in my group believe that the meals are a central catalyst to our closeness. All the members in this group were strangers to each other and only recently began attending West Houston. Our meetings typically lasted three hours and were characterized by a growing sense of community. Often group members would talk about how the small group was their "family." The relationships we were building together transcended the social and racial diversity of the group. At one point the group voted to cease meals and focus only on sharing the word. Meetings became shorter and before long the closeness that had been developing in the group began to wane. The group finally returned to its practice of sharing meals together at each meeting in order to regain that closeness. Meals facilitate the type of interaction that is needed to build an inclusive community that challenges worldly values.

Hospitality and Identity

Missional hospitality is an ongoing initiative of the church that builds authentic communal relationships through standing in solidarity with each other and with the surrounding community. The community that is built through the practice of missional hospitality includes strangers and disrupts unjust societal norms, while reflecting kingdom values. The practice of missional hospitality is central to the identity of the church and is critical to maintaining a vibrant faith community.

Practicing Missional Hospitality

In an attempt to foster the practice of missional community at West Houston, a planning group was formed and met for nine weeks in the fall of 2014. Cultural change happens in authentic relational settings, which include dialogue, theological reflection, and a challenge to learn new ways of living.³⁴ Thus the group studied the theological concept of missional hospitality, engaged in earnest dialogue, and practiced missional hospitality through various practical assignments. Assignments to practice missional hospitality contributed to the group's appreciation for missional hospitality. When asked, group members agreed that the process was personally transformative. This culminated in a plan by the group to

³⁴ Patrick Keifert, "The Return of the Congregation to Theological Conversation," pp. 13-26 in *Testing the Spirits: How Theology Informs the Study of Congregations*, ed. Patrick Keifert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 21.

cultivate the practice of missional hospitality at West Houston with an emphasis on small groups.

Missional Hospitality for an Attractional Church

The planning group valued the concept of missional living, but also found worth in the benefits of a large church like West Houston. The group wanted to find ways to apply missional hospitality to an attractional church. One of those applications involved reaching the unchurched people God brings on a weekly basis. The team felt strongly that West Houston has a responsibility to extend missional hospitality to all within its four walls.

The planning team noticed that it seemed easier to assimilate new members into groups where new members were the majority than to integrate them into older groups. This fact is evidenced within three of the four missional communities represented in the planning team. The leaders of these three small groups impressed on the planning team that many unchurched people attend West Houston each Sunday, but few small groups are connecting with them. For example, my missional community is made up almost completely of people attending West Houston less than one year. Several of my small group members have not become members of West Houston yet. I have met and recruited most of our small group members within the church walls. However, most missional communities (small groups) are not oriented toward assimilating newcomers.

New members are not connecting to existing small groups within West Houston, but they tend to be receptive to forming new relationships. Thus the team proposed forming new missional communities out of new members and providing these groups with a strong leader or shepherd from the existing membership. This duplicates what has worked well with the three groups on the planning team. These three missional communities have strong leaders that formed a nucleus to which the new members were attracted. The team exhibited more excitement over this idea than any other idea presented. While the planning team still hopes to mold the existing small group culture into a more missional form, it also realizes that creating new groups alongside the old groups is an effective way to begin impacting the overall culture of the church. The consensus was that missional hospitality should inform the way we interact with guests within our worship center and the way we bring new members into the church body.

Action Plan

The plan devised by the group suggested focusing on the following four distinct areas. First, missional community leaders would be trained in

the theological practice of missional hospitality. Missional communities revolve around their leaders at West Houston; training these leaders is crucial to groups adopting the practice of missional hospitality. This was to be accomplished through already existing biannual trainings and enhanced with biweekly trainings that would be offered on a volunteer basis to missional community leaders. These trainings would model missional hospitality and include the same type of learning and assigned practices that had been experienced by the planning group. Second, new members would be inculcated into the practice of missional hospitality as a part of their initiation into membership. At that time, prospective members attended a two-hour class that involved a meal, but the session was primarily designed to disseminate information and obtain a membership commitment. In the future, those desiring to place membership would attend an eight-week course called "discovery group," in which missional hospitality would be modeled in the context of a meal. The intent was to form a new missional community out of the prospective members. A previously trained group leader along with a few core members would provide leadership for the newly formed missional community. This goal intended to remediate the existing situation in which new members are not being assimilated by existing missional communities. The third part of the plan was to conduct a congregation-wide focus on missional hospitality through a simultaneous sermon and Sunday school class series. These lessons were to be coupled with a challenge to the church to form teams within their missional communities to practice missional hospitality by inviting their neighbors to a meal. The planning group was keenly aware that a cultural change would have to be enacted for the practice of missional hospitality to become a regular praxis of small groups. The group expressed hope that the different parts of this plan would work together to begin the process of conversation and practice necessary for cultural change.

After this action plan had been developed and implemented, the ministry staff at West Houston added an additional element to keep the practice of missional hospitality before the congregation. Ministers purchased a large casserole dish with the words "Say Yes to the Dish" engraved on it. Each minister invited an elder couple into their home and a guest that was either: 1) a new member, 2) an unchurched friend, or 3) someone visiting the church. The elder couple committed to continuing the practice by inviting a church couple and guest to dinner and then handing off the dish to the invited church couple to continue the practice. A journal was provided to record the guests and describe the experience of the evening. The front cover of the journal describes the process so it can be

repeated. Recently, all of the elders came before the congregation, handed off their casserole dish to another couple, and invited the congregation to join in this practice by purchasing their own casserole dish.

Small Group Response – Leader training was optional in our plan because culture change cannot be forced. The idea was to train a small group of committed missional community leaders who would then lead their group to plant a new missional community within one to two years; missional hospitality was to be a key component of the training. The hope was that the number of groups that are committed to missional hospitality would grow exponentially from small beginnings. It was assumed that the beginnings would be small due to the high level of commitment required from leaders to participate in the training. This process has proved slower than we imagined. There were only four out of thirty groups that participated in the volunteer trainings. Only three of those groups are still following the missional hospitality program. It will require leadership and staying power if these groups are to continue on this path and give birth to groups that also practice missional hospitality.

Efforts were made to encourage all groups to practice missional hospitality. Moving a congregation and specifically small groups from a practice that consisted of Bible study and fellowship crammed into a one hour time frame to a more robust practice of eating together, sharing life with each other, and inviting in strangers has proved more difficult than we imagined. As a part of this process we invited in the training group Mission Alive to partner with us in teaching our leaders the concept of living in a missional community. The concept of missional hospitality was expanded to involve sharing life together on a weekly and daily basis. This concept would require members of a missional community to live in close proximity to each other and engage in regular life activities together. This view of missional community was not well received by our members, who live in a large metroplex that is characterized by a fast-pace of life, long commute times, and diverse family activities that are community driven rather than church driven. Only a few of our groups have truly gravitated to the practice of living together missionally. We are still facing an uphill battle to encourage our groups to practice missional hospitality. We have learned that we can foster the practice of missional hospitality, but we will have to do it within the confines of a suburban North American culture. Also, changing an attractional, suburban culture into a culture of mission and hospitality is challenging and requires staying power.

New Member Recruitment – One of the planning group members agreed to teach the first “discovery group” and attempt to form a small

group out of it. This was successful and gave us hope that this practice could be used to effectively assimilate new members through the practice of missional hospitality. However, we ran into difficulties with subsequent new member classes. The main obstacle was that we lacked a leader from the congregation to form a new small group out of the new members who were joining. We believe that if we had a pipeline that was producing small group leaders it would be possible to form new groups out of the new members. Though we have talented members, we have been unable to recruit them to start new groups. There is a need to stir up a desire among our people to launch new groups that will primarily be vehicles to assimilating new members. Understandably, most of our members prefer to stay in the safety of their present groups.

Congregational Response – Responding to the sermon series, a significant number of members and small groups initiated a meal based on the concept of missional hospitality. A significant number of our members posted details of their missional hospitality on our Facebook page. However, it is unlikely that this has become a regular practice. Also, while there has been a favorable response to the “Say Yes to the Dish” initiative, the congregation as a whole is not participating in the program. The participation has been limited to those who have received the original ten dishes from the ministers and an additional ten members, who purchased their own dishes to initiate this practice. Our hope is that overtime the practice will extend to others.

What Have We Learned?

I asked the planning group to plan a meal in their respective missional community that would include inviting someone who is unchurched. I asked them to choose a date and plan a formal event within their missional community to fulfil this assignment. Interestingly, only my missional community fulfilled the assignment as I envisioned it. My small group planned a meal at my house to which we invited several people we had met outside of the West Houston setting. However, others in the planning group found less programmatic ways of fulfilling the assignment. None of them set a date ahead of time and worked their way toward it.

Natural Traffic Patterns – I learned that missional hospitality occurs in the natural traffic patterns of our lives and is the result of an adopted lifestyle. This practice cannot be easily assured through education and programming. An example of this is one of the team members who invited a former unchurched neighbor to play at Topgolf with the men from his missional community; they had drinks together and were able to get to

know each other. The neighbor talked about how his children are attending a Christian school and learning about God. Another group member invited a coworker, who was struggling to believe in God, to lunch. He and his coworker agreed to meet more regularly to discuss theological matters. A third member met his neighbor, who is Nigerian, and invited him and his family to a barbecue at his house. He also invited the man's children to swim in his pool. In all three cases the extension of hospitality was a spontaneous opportunity seized upon by the group members, not a formal invitation to a missional community meeting. All agreed that their practice of missional hospitality was spurred by participation in the planning team sessions. However, the practice evidenced itself in the natural traffic patterns of their life, not as a preplanned event. Missional hospitality happens in the natural traffic patterns of our lives and in God's timing as we open our eyes to people around us. At best, programs may spur us to be more aware of God's work in others' lives.

Influencing Culture – Cultural transformation will need to occur if missional hospitality is to become a regular practice at West Houston, yet cultural transformation is a difficult goal to accomplish. It is dangerous to assume that a “top-down” program will change the existing culture of West Houston. In fact, it could cause more harm than good. Projects to effect organizational change often fail due to the lack of “sufficient knowledge of the nature or importance of organizational culture.”³⁵ The cultural construct at West Houston is based on thirty years of interpretive stories and practices. It is naïve to think that the entire culture can be easily changed.³⁶ I do not believe the culture of a church can be completely changed, but the goal should be to influence the culture by building on past strengths that are compatible with the new direction of missional hospitality.³⁷ It is important that the task of cultivating missional hospitality at West Houston be accompanied by an informed view of the culture at West Houston. This means that the church needs to build on the strengths it has exemplified through use of its family metaphor language to create new family groupings or extend existing family groupings through the practice of missional hospitality in small groups.

³⁵ Gerald W. Driskill and Angela Laird Brenton, *Organizational Culture in Action: A Cultural Analysis Workbook*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2011), 16.

³⁶ While some researchers believe information from culture can be used pragmatically to change culture, others question whether culture can be changed at all. Driskill and Brenton, *Organizational Culture*, 17.

³⁷ Branson talks about how building on positive themes from a congregation's past through dialogue is critical to moving a church forward into a positive vision of the future. Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004), 77-112.

Influencing culture is challenging because much of it is hidden at a subconscious level. Culture is reinforced through storytelling and practice. “In other words, as humans, we actively participate in creating and re-creating the determinative power” of our culture through our communications and actions with each other.³⁸ This means that both teaching and engaging in dialogue with small-group leaders, small-group members, and the congregation can provide a platform for influencing the culture at West Houston. New conversations and practices over a long period of time can lead to new stories and a degree of cultural transformation. This is a laudable and achievable goal, but it must be carried out in an informed and incremental fashion to be successful.

Conclusion

It is likely that more work needs to be done to explore the difference between the church’s historically attractional ethos and the newly desired focus on missional hospitality. The truth is that missional hospitality is rooted in a heart transformed by the missional love of God. Thus cultural change at any church will require prayerful reliance on God’s help. The hope is that raising awareness of the theological concept of missional hospitality will create a dialogue concerning the practice, and encourage people to actually delve into the practice. It is my prayer that God will work through this process to engender the practice of missional hospitality at West Houston and in churches across North America.

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³⁸ This process is called social constructionism. Driskill and Brenton, *Organizational Culture*, 19.