

The Church as Subversive Community

by Mike Bishop, whatischurch.com

Mary, Mary, quite contrary

How does your garden grow?

With silver bells and cockle shells

And pretty maids all in a row.

For the past generation, one of the hottest topics among pastors and church leaders has been church growth. **“Pastor, Pastor, quite contrary, how does your garden grow?”** Theories abound and models for 'doing church' come and go like teenage fashion fads. But in the middle of all this discussion and strategy a few very practical questions remain: "How does God intend his church to grow? What are the means by which the gospel of Jesus is spread? What is the job of the average Christian? How should pastors lead in this endeavor?" One attempt to answer these questions should be very familiar. For lack of a better name, I will call it the 'Church Growth' paradigm. Here are a few of this paradigm's basic assumptions:

A simple vision - bring the gospel of salvation in Jesus to the entire world by any means necessary.

Ethnic groups, generational groups, special needs groups, etc. are identified, studied, targeted, and advanced upon with this gospel in hopes that they will be assimilated into the Kingdom and a church.

Massive amounts of funding, personnel, strategy, planning, and leadership are necessary to pull off this enormous undertaking.

One of Church Growth's primary tools is to coax people into a special place once a week where God is the focus of the entire event (traditionally, a service on Sunday morning). The idea is that if people will think about God for a few hours on Sunday, maybe they'll also consider him the other 166 hours during the week. All manner of resources are expended to make those few precious hours as efficient and relevant as possible. Countless programs are concocted to try and connect people with God at other times. The amount of blood, sweat, prayer, and tears expended in this paradigm is extraordinary.

As a reward for all that effort, Church Growth has been extremely successful. The gospel has reached more corners of the world than ever thought possible in the last 100 years. But without going into the problems associated with Church Growth, let me propose another way to answer those fundamental questions. Let's assume that you've tried Church Growth and found it wanting. Or, you've simply run out of silver bells and cockle shells and pretty maids all in a row. This next paradigm I would like to describe is much less popular and remains largely untried in North America. Again, for lack of a better name, I will call it the 'Subversive Community'.

'Subversive' is an odd word to associate with Christian ministry, but that is only because of its uses in recent world history. Webster's defines 'subvert', *"to overturn or overthrow from the foundation."* *It's origin is Latin, "subvertere, literally, to turn from beneath."* Eugene Peterson has a great description of this paradigm's assumptions:

"Three things are implicit in subversion. One, the status quo is wrong and must be overthrown if the world is going to be livable. It is so deeply wrong that repair work is futile. The world is, in the word insurance agents use to designate our wrecked cars, totaled.

Two, there is another world aborning that is livable. Its reality is no chimera (illusion). It is in existence, though not visible. Its character is known. The subversive does not operate out of a utopian dream but out of a conviction of the nature of the real world.

Three, the usual means by which one kingdom is thrown out and another put in its place - military force or democratic elections - are not available. If we have neither a preponderance of power nor a majority of votes, we begin searching for other ways to effect change. We discover the methods of subversion. We find and welcome allies."

The Subversive Community's mission is not to bring the kingdom of God from without; it is to release the kingdom of God from within. Subversives do not "reach outside people and encourage them to come in." Subversives live and do their work 'undercover' where the world lives and breathes. Their goal is not escapism (trying to build a Christian utopia), but to show people how they can lay hold of life as God intended, in his Kingdom.

The Subversive Community understands that the world and its ways are false. It is constantly interacting with people at work, in the grocery store, or at home who are all in the prison of this world's system. These prisoners are quite happy in their assumed reality (especially the ones who have amassed quite a kingdom of wealth). But some secretly ask the question, "Is this really all there is to life?" The Subversive Community's answer is not merely to inform them about the Kingdom, but to invite them to become participants in a whole new reality. The training program will be unique and cannot be rushed or broken down into a few 'principles' that are easy to swallow. Remember, the kingdom of God deals with every aspect of our lives. This training might just take a lifetime.

The chief aim of the Subversive Community is to train other subversives, which is really what the Great Commission was all about. So what are our tools? Where do we begin in this training? How do we train others? Again I'll reference Peterson from "The Contemplative Pastor":

"Prayer and parable are the stock-in-trade tools of the subversive pastor. The quiet (or noisy) closet life of prayer enters into partnership with the Spirit that strives still with every human heart, a wrestling match in holiness. And parables are the consciousness-altering words that slip past falsifying platitude and invade the human spirit with Christ-truth."

Andrew Jones used to have on his website this tag line: "One who tells stories and throws parties." Combine that statement with Peterson's and you get the closest thing to a strategy for church planting available. I call it the "Three-P's of Church Planting" --- Prayer, Parables, and Parties.

Prayer

In the absence of building programs, 45-minute sermons three times a week, and an "outreach ministry," there is prayer. The "wrestling match" to which Peterson refers is not the hand-wringing sessions most prayer meetings resemble. "Oh God, our culture is so *bad*. Why are people not coming to our church service anymore? Please bless our next outreach program so we can advance your kingdom." Instead of asking God to bless our programs, we should be trying to bless His. This takes a willingness to do two things: ask and wait. Our community has

grown through having times of prayer that include more *silence* than prayer. We are trying to learn corporately the ancient (and anti-Western) discipline of solitude and silence. As we've grown in our ability to hear God's voice, we've found a few simple prayers that have been helpful:

"God, what have you created us to be in our community?"

"How can we represent your Kingdom in our jobs, families, circles of friends, and neighborhoods?"

"Make us aware of your rule and reign today in every situation."

"Lead us to men and women of peace that will provide contact with the world in places where your Spirit is working." (See Luke 10)

Parables

The Subversive Community is a living story. It sees itself as a footnote to Chapter Three in the Story of God and His People. Simultaneously we are living within the Larger Story, the story of our faith community, and our individual stories. This has always been so, but the church has kept these stories stored away on a dusty shelf and tried to give the world the Cliff Notes instead. It's time to take the musty books down and learn the art of storytelling again.

Jesus understood the deeply subversive nature of stories. He used parables like ticking time bombs of truth implanted in his hearer's minds. They would sit there unprotected, challenging assumptions and coaxing the soul to establish a new foundation for life. N.T. Wright explains, "When Jesus announced the kingdom, the stories he told functioned like dramatic plays in search of actors. His hearers were invited to audition for parts in the kingdom. They had been eager for God's drama to be staged and were waiting to find out what they would have to do when he did so. Now they were to discover. They were to become kingdom-people themselves."

The Subversive Community can use parable in many different ways. Our community has utilized the Web to tell our story on a global and local stage. The recent web-logging craze (www.blogger.com) has enabled us to keep our story documented real-time and from the point of view of each participant. Music, art, and poetry allow the community to present the story in fresh, creative ways. Even something benign like how you design your house can communicate truth about the Kingdom. Parable is in its nature a creative act so it is most effective when you decide to be original and invite the Holy Spirit to tell God's story through your life. Don't just use someone else's stories; come up with your own!

Parties

"People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God." (Luke 13:29) **Jesus often used the party or feast to represent the kingdom of God.** His first miracle was performed at a wedding reception, he feasted with his brand new followers Levi and Zacchaeus, and his most famous parable ended with a huge party for a prodigal son. Often, Christians think true spirituality looks more like fasting than it does feasting. But Jesus responds, "Do wedding guests fast while celebrating with the groom?" (Luke 5:34) The Subversive Community knows how to party.

Our community has organized a few parties, which we call Kingdom Feasts. We invite friends, family, co-workers, people from other churches, and anyone else who wants to come. The last one was held at the beach where we cooked a ton of burgers and played volleyball in perfect South Florida weather. Another time we fried up a bunch of shrimp and worshipped into the night.

But each time, our focus as participants is to demonstrate to ourselves and our guests that the kingdom of God is here.

The Subversive Community would never be caught trying to coax the world into a church building. It believes the church (which is you and me) exists primarily out in the world just being itself. But we are not passive observers of a world going to hell. We are here to overthrow the world's assumptions about life and our hope for the future. Peterson now completes our job description:

"This is our primary work in the real world. But we need continual convincing. The people whom we are praying and among whom we are telling parables are seduced into supposing that their money and ambition are making the world turn on its axis. There are so many of them and so few of us, making it difficult to maintain our convictions. It is easy to be seduced along with them.

Words are the real work of the world - prayer words with God, parable words with men and women. The behind-the-scenes work of creativity by word and sacrament, by parable and prayer, subverts the seduced world. The pastor's real work is what Ivan Illich calls "shadow work" - the work nobody gets paid for and few notice but that makes a world of salvation: meaning and value and purpose, a world of love and hope and faith - in short, the kingdom of God."

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