

## FOUR CHARACTERISTICS OF EXTERNALLY FOCUSED CHURCHES

Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson

One of the key elements of [Church Volunteer Central's foundational theology](#) is that every believer should be serving in ministry. But let's face it— you can only use so many Sunday school teachers, children's workers, and greeters. If every single believer is going to be in ministry, how are leaders supposed to find things for them to do? The key is in the growing movement among churches to stop spending so much time and energy looking at themselves, and start concentrating on the community in which they were called to be salt and light. In their new book, [The Externally Focused Church](#), Rusaw and Swanson do an excellent job of describing the importance of equipping your people for ministry outside your church's walls. This excerpt from that book does a great job of setting the stage:

Regardless of size, location, or denomination, externally focused churches have four characteristics in common. **First, they are convinced that good deeds and good news can't and shouldn't be separated.** Just as it takes two wings to lift an airplane off the ground, so externally focused churches couple good news with good deeds to make an impact on their communities. The good deeds, expressed in service and ministry to others, validate the good news. The good news explains the purpose of the good deeds.

Good news and good deeds are, after all, the summation of Jesus' ministry. God proclaimed the “good news...through Jesus Christ...and...he went around *doing good*...because God was with him” (Acts 10:36-38, emphasis added). When the crowds were following Jesus, he “welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God [good news], and healed those who needed healing [good deeds]” (Luke 9:11). When Jesus sent the twelve disciples out, “he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God [good news] and to heal the sick [good deeds]” (Luke 9:2).

Engaging the community with good news and good deeds is not just a tactic or even a foundational strategy of externally focused churches; it is at their very core; it is who they are. These churches have concluded that it's really not “church” if it's not engaged in the life of the community through ministry and service to others. Ministry and service are not programs reserved for a few extraordinarily dedicated individuals but are woven into every aspect of church life. This is certainly not the only thing these churches do, but to stop ministering to and serving in the community would be to end their very existence. An external focus is embedded in their DNA.

**Second, they see themselves as vital to the health and wellbeing of their communities.** They believe that their communities, with all of their aspirations and challenges, cannot be truly healthy without the church's involvement. They have moved beyond thinking about the church's health apart from the community...to what the community would be like apart from the church. They recognize that God has placed them in their communities (whether they feel wanted or not) to be salt, light, and leaven. They are not social workers but kingdom builders!

Why have so many churches emotionally or physically withdrawn from their communities? Sometimes churches feel unwanted. Whereas the church may once have been the center of the community, the community has changed its focus and left the church behind. Maybe this separation has something to do with the New Testament word for *church*. It is the word *ecclesia*, meaning “the called out ones.” Many have mistaken this to mean a physical separation from the world. The church is called to be separate in lifestyle but never to be isolated from the people it seeks to influence. Salt, light, and leaven don't work very well from a distance.

Pastor Keith Zafren of River Church Community in San Jose, California, posits another idea. He notes that the theme of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, written

in 1675, involves escaping the wicked city in pursuit of the celestial city. Keith points out that this theme of escaping the city has subconsciously influenced the church for over three hundred years! Could it also be that Christians have tried to turn the church into a celestial city where we can educate our kids, eat our meals after church, and enjoy our circle of friends away from the wicked city?[1](#)

It is only when the church is mixed into the very life and conversation of the city that it can be an effective force for change. In approximately A.D. 150, a Christian writer described the lifestyle of second-century Christians. Summing up his thoughts, he wrote, "As the soul is to the body, so Christians [are] to the world."[2](#) Christians are nothing less than the very soul of the community. What happens when the soul is removed from the body? Nothing remains but a corpse or a shell. Externally focused churches recognize that the gospel is most powerful when Christians are living in face-to-face relationships with those in their communities. Addressing Christians' involvement in the community, the Christian writer Tertullian wrote:

[Do we not] dwell beside you, sharing your way of life, your dress, your habits and the same needs of life? We are no Brahmins or Indian gymnosophists, dwelling in woods and exiled from life... We stay beside you in this world, making use of the forum, the provision-market, the bath, the booth, the workshop, the inn, the weekly market, and all other places of commerce. We sail with you, fight at your side, till the soil with you, and traffic with you; we likewise join our technical skill to that of others, and make our works public property for your use.[3](#)

Wow! The early Christians were not a society of separatists. They engaged in the life of the city. They socialized with their neighbors. They looked out for them. What about your church? Is it part of the warp and weft of the community?

In joining in the life and rhythm of the city, externally focused churches seek to serve and bless the city, not to control it. After all, salt, light, and leaven are agents of influence, not of control. Thus these churches build bridges instead of walls. They bless their cities and pray for them. They are one of the defined assets of their communities, not one of the liabilities.

**Third, they believe that ministering and serving are the normal expressions of Christian living.** Even more, they believe that Christians grow best when they are serving and giving themselves away to others. Because service and ministry are part of their growth model for the church and the spiritual formation of its people, it is not unusual for huge percentages of their congregations to serve and minister outside the walls of the church. Wanting to be like Jesus, who came not to be served but to serve and to give (Mark 10:45), externally focused churches serve and give themselves to others. They are convinced that Christians can learn through good instruction but they really cannot grow if they remain uninvolved in ministry and service.

**Fourth, externally focused churches are evangelistically effective .** It's no secret that the church in North America is not hitting the ball out of the park evangelistically. Church attendance has dropped from a high of 49% in 1991 to 43% in 2002.[4](#) While the U.S. population grew by 9 percent between 1992 and 1999, the median adult attendance per church service has dropped 12 percent during the same time frame.[5](#) A study initiated by Hartford Seminary and conducted by Faith Communities Today (FACT) of more than 14,000 congregations showed that only half of the congregations are growing.[6](#) Much perceived growth is simply transfer growth between churches. Attendance at two-thirds of U.S. churches has either plateaued or is declining. According to a study by the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) of over 50,000 American households in 2001, "the proportion of the population that can be classified as Christian has declined from 86 percent in 1990 to 77 percent in 2001."[7](#) It's a sad day when at the annual meeting, the chairman of the board reports, "We didn't have any conversions this year, giving is down, and we're \$20,000 in debt, but praise God, no other churches in our town

are doing better.”

The good news for externally focused churches, according to the FACT study, is “congregations with a strong commitment to social justice and with direct participation in community outreach ministries are more likely to be growing than other congregations.”<sup>8</sup>

The demographics of our country are changing. Fewer people claim a Christian heritage. Recently at Rocky Mountain Christian Church in Longmont, Colorado, a man in his thirties shared his conversion testimony with the congregation. He was an auto mechanic who had never darkened the door of a church. He had never been to a Christian wedding or funeral. He had never attended an Easter or Christmas service. He asked a friend to take him to church because he “didn’t know how to go to church.”

What? He didn’t know how to go to church? Who wouldn’t know how to go to church? But think of it this way...would you know how to go to a Buddhist temple? How about a mosque? Do you know if these institutions have open seating or assigned seats? Do they expect nonbelievers to follow the same external patterns of bowing or kneeling as the true believers? There’s a lot to know.

We must accept the fact that an increasingly large portion of our population has no idea of “how to go to church.” Externally focused churches have the advantage of deploying people into the community where they can be church to people through their love and service. Their light is not hidden under a bushel. No, they are letting their light shine. You’ll learn about these churches in this book.

Although these churches serve their communities expecting nothing in return, many people are drawn into the kingdom through their presence, service, and love. The Bible tells us that Peter encountered a “paralytic who had been bedridden for eight years. ‘Aeneas,’ Peter said to him, ‘Jesus Christ heals you. Get up...’ Immediately Aeneas got up. All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord” (Acts 9:33-35). It could be argued that these folks turned to the Lord because their friend was healed. But the healed man was simply the evidence of the existence, love, and power of the healer, Jesus. After observing Jesus’ compassion and love, people responded, “God has come to help his people” (Luke 7:16b).

In our evangelistic zeal, we often think people just need more or better information in order to believe. But what they really long for is authenticity. Fewer are asking, “What must I do to be saved?” Instead their question is “What can I do to make my life work?” When the people who talk about a loving God demonstrate love, the gap between doubt and faith is narrowed, and the people around them often find themselves wanting to believe.

Leesburg, Florida, a town of about twenty thousand people, is just a speck on the map of central Florida, yet it has one of the best examples we’ve seen of an externally focused church. First Baptist Church has spawned nearly seventy ministries to intersect the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of the people in Leesburg. Through their Men’s Shelter, Women’s Care Center, Latchkey Ministry, Children’s Home, Benevolence Ministry, and other ministries, they regularly lead hundreds of people to Christ and disciple them in maturity and service. Senior Pastor Charles Roesel says, “The only way the gospel can be biblically shared is to focus on the whole person, with all [his or her] hurts and needs, and to involve the church in ministering to those persons and leading them to Christ. This is the essence of our ministry evangelism.”<sup>9</sup>

Vineyard Community Church of Cincinnati, through its “servant evangelism” (“showing others the love of Christ with no strings attached”) regularly sees hundreds of people come to faith each year. This is founding pastor Steve

Sjogren's admonition to church planters: "Don't go to start a church...go to serve a city. Serve them with love, and if you go after the people nobody wants, you'll end up with the people everybody wants."<sup>10</sup> Each Saturday you will find this church engaged in practical ways to show the love of Christ to Cincinnati. Its members might be washing cars or handing out bottled water or delivering groceries to hungry families. People are drawn to such places of light. People are looking for places of authenticity where the walk matches the talk—where faith is making a difference. These words are carved in stone over the entrance of the church: "Small things done with great love will change the world." Vineyard is changing the world.

Excerpted from [\*The Externally Focused Church\*](#) (Group Publishing), Copyright © 2004, Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson.

*What about your church? Is its focus more on internal programs, or external ministries? Why has it chosen the emphasis it has? Share your views with the Church Volunteer Central community in our Member Forum by [clicking here](#).*

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<sup>1</sup> Keith Zafren, comments (San Jose, CA: in a sermon titled "A Church in the City for the City," River Church Community, May 5, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus, chapter 6, verse 25, [www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-01/anf01-08.htm#P679\\_123511](http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-01/anf01-08.htm#P679_123511)

<sup>3</sup> Tertullian, as quoted in *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, vol. 1, by Adolf Harnack (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 216

<sup>4</sup> Barna research online: [www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PageCategory.asp?CategoryID=10](http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PageCategory.asp?CategoryID=10)

<sup>5</sup> Barna Research Group, results of telephone poll.

<sup>6</sup> Hartford, CT: Hartford Seminary/Faith Communities Today (FACT) study: [www.fact.hartsem.edu/executive\\_summary.htm](http://www.fact.hartsem.edu/executive_summary.htm)

<sup>7</sup> American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Hartford, CT: FACT study.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Roesel, comments (Leesburg, FL: conversation with Eric Swanson at First Baptist Church, April 8, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Steve Sjogren, comments (Cincinnati, OH: conversation with Eric Swanson, Vineyard Community Church, May 6, 2003).