

THE
EXTERNALLY
FOCUSED
CHURCH

RICK RUSAW & ERIC SWANSON

Foreword by Robert Lewis

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The Externally Focused Church

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Dedication

To all those who have picked up the towel and basin
and made a difference in their communities.
We applaud you and thank you for the inspiration
and for the many stories you've shared with us,
a few of which have found their way to these pages.

—Eric and Rick

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Foreword

Something wonderful is happening today. After a long slumber, the evangelical church is reawakening to its *other side*. I call it the *proof* side of proclaiming the gospel.

I first experienced this other side when our church, along with several others, organized to renovate some of the public schools in our area. Teachers and school officials had not asked for our help and were clearly surprised when we offered it. But when thousands of church volunteers descended on their schools, rebuilding playgrounds, landscaping entryways, laying carpet, constructing hundreds of much needed cabinets, and painting hallways and classrooms, something special took place.

They believed...

Through witnessing these selfless demonstrations of love and helpful acts of service, they believed that the church just might have something worth listening to. I will never forget the comment of one fourth-grade teacher as she stood there, amazed at the work being done on her classroom by complete strangers: "If this is Christianity, then I'm interested," she said.

It was then and there that I realized our world is still open to a gospel it can hear *and see*. The real gospel is two-sided—it's *truth* and *proof*!

Imagine Jesus going out into towns and villages during his public ministry and proclaiming his gospel *without* accompanying acts of healing and helping (Matthew 9:35). Do we really think our Savior would have gained a hearing (much less a following) or established the credibility of his message—without displaying some proof that this gospel was real? *Why would we ignore such a model?*

We need to be like Jesus. Like him, we need to be *out* in our communities, connecting with people through acts of amazing love...while connecting *them* to a God of amazing grace. Now that's good news!

History tells us the church has always been at its best when its gospel comes two-sided like this. Evangelicals have had some of their greatest moments when this has been the case. One has to look back only a few years to John and Charles Wesley, William Wilberforce, and Charles Finney for some outstanding examples. But new examples are already on the horizon

as more and more churches rediscover this external focus.

I have been overwhelmed with the response of our church since those early days when we took our first cautious steps into some of the urban neighborhoods of our city. Formerly passive church members have gained a new vision and energy for the use of their talents and gifts. New partnerships and friendships have been established. We no longer appear as some “secret society” or stranger to our city. We are now solidly networked all over our community. Today we have six full-time staff members devoted to enhancing and expanding our community strategy. Presently, we are thrilled to be beginning a multi-year project of adopting a 130-block area of our city for social, spiritual, economic, and educational revitalization.

So if you’re not already awake to what’s happening today, I can assure you Eric Swanson and Rick Rusaw will get you there. These are good men with great insight regarding the sacred balance of truth and proof so needed in today’s churches.

Through consulting with churches across America, Eric has a solid grasp on how God is right now turning a first wave of churches outward. You will be inspired, as I have been, by the real-life stories of the churches he describes in this book. As a practitioner, Rick has real-world, frontline experience in leading his church in learning how to connect with the community. Together in *The Externally Focused Church*, they offer a rich blend of scriptural insights, assessment perspectives, and practical how-to’s that will energize you and lead you to rejoice over this current reawakening that’s full of new opportunities and new adventures in transforming our world with the good news of Jesus Christ.

So sit back, relax, and let these men show you some of the “new things” God is doing in our world today.

—Robert Lewis

Founding Pastor, Fellowship Bible Church
Little Rock, Arkansas
Author, *The Church of Irresistible Influence*

Preface

When we first met three years ago, we recognized that each of us brings unique passions, contributions, and experiences to the subject of the externally focused church. Eric lives in Boulder, Colorado, and works with the Leadership Network as the director of Leadership Communities for Externally Focused Churches. He also serves as a consultant with CitiReach International, working with externally focused churches in several cities around the world. As the senior pastor of LifeBridge Christian Church in Longmont, Colorado, Rick is a pragmatic practitioner who has defined his thinking and passion for community engagement through his preaching, teaching, and writing. And in his role as an independent consultant, Rick has helped a number of people in leadership (in both business and ministry arenas) communicate and live out the vision God has given them. The result is that LifeBridge is a recognized leader among growing, externally focused churches.

Eric's thinking on constructs and models has helped Rick explain what he has practiced for years. And as Eric began identifying and investigating the emerging leaders of externally focused churches, he found himself telling the LifeBridge story wherever his travels took him. So for some time, we've benefited from each other's strengths and experiences.

This book is the tangible manifestation of that ongoing collaboration. It is intended to challenge pastors and church leaders to share the vision of being externally focused. At the end of each chapter, you'll find something to think about, something to talk about, something to act upon, and sermon or lesson ideas. We encourage you to reflect privately on these sections and then to share them with others to fuel their passion and vision for outreach and service.

In the "Closer Look" sections of the book (marked by a binocular icon), you'll find examples of externally focused churches in action or community agencies from which you can learn. Use these sections when you're looking for a quick illustration of the book's ideas while sharing them with other leaders in your church.

Co-writing a book is much like melding two useful objects in order to create something more useful and valuable than either could be by itself. Copper and zinc are heated to create brass, two streams converge to make

a river, a man and woman recite vows to begin a marriage, hydrogen and oxygen molecules bond together to form water, and bacon and eggs make breakfast. Two distinct objects become useful as a third object by means of heat, pressure, time, or thoughtful design. We would like to thank Krista Petty, who through heat, pressure, and thoughtful design, extracted concept from chaos and clarity from ambiguity and, in the process, helped create something of greater value. Bacon and eggs take a cook to make breakfast. Paint and canvas need an artist to create a painting. Krista is that chef. Krista is that artist.

We would also like to thank our editor, Candace McMahan, whose meticulous attention to detail, accuracy, and continuity has helped us immeasurably in writing a book that will be useful to the body of Christ.

Finally, we wish to thank the leaders of the externally focused churches who have allowed us to share their stories in this book. If there ever comes a day that the term *externally focused church* is redundant, we will have these and many other churches to thank for leading the way.

—Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson

June, 2004

"We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give."

—Winston Churchill

Introduction

A number of years ago, while speaking to a small group of pastors, Chuck Colson described a national prayer breakfast he had recently attended. Colson said that the room was full of powerful people. The president of the United States, congressmen, senators, leaders of industry, and heads of state were all in attendance. However, he noted that the most powerful person in the room had no title, was small in stature, and had few financial resources. But when she spoke, even presidents listened. Mother Teresa's power stemmed not from position, title, or wealth but from her role as servant. She had earned the right to be heard through a lifetime of service.

No one would argue that Christians shouldn't serve. Jesus said he had come to serve, not to be served. The early church served. Service is, and should be, the identifying mark of Christians and the church.

But every statistic tells us that the church in America today is becoming more and more marginalized and less and less influential. We don't need another Barna study to tell us that fewer people feel the church can help them. There are many reasons for this, but two stand out. First, as messengers, Christians have a difficult task, not because the message isn't compelling, but because we aren't always compelling messengers. In fact, we are often our own worst enemies. Society is no longer scandalized by improprieties among those who claim to follow Christ; it has come to expect them. Second, we have to tell the truth to a world that no longer believes in truth. John Bruce, pastor of Creekside Community Church in San Leandro, California, describes this dilemma. "For so many years I felt that my evangelism was like presenting my case before a jury, but the judge wouldn't allow me to present any evidence."¹

One of the most effective ways to reach people with the message of Jesus Christ today is through real and relevant acts of service. Honest, compassionate service can restore credibility to the crucial message we have to share. To *tell* the truth, we must *show* the truth. It's the model Jesus used. He served. He met needs. People listened. Erwin McManus, pastor of Mosaic, a

church in Los Angeles, stated this simple yet powerful truth about sharing the message of Christ today: “People have given up on the truth because they don’t believe anyone can be trusted.”² The world is full of people who have been hurt by those who were supposed to love them—people they should have been able to trust. Before churches will be heard, they must re-establish trust. To establish trust, they must first show their ability to love.

Two items clearly reveal the truth about what matters most to us: our checkbooks and our calendars. Regardless of what we claim, how we spend our money and our time exposes what truly matters to us. Likewise, if we were to examine church calendars and budgets, we could determine fairly quickly what really matters most to our churches today. Is it what mattered to Jesus?

Churches talk about service, and everyone agrees that it ought to be important to us, but do we really know how to effectively meet the needs of our communities and reach lost people? Are we willing to step outside the safety net of our church pews and cross the street into real-life, real-world acts of service in order to share the truth of Jesus Christ?

The Externally Focused Church

There is a movement creeping its way across churches of all shapes, sizes, and denominations. It’s gaining ground, it’s getting attention, and it’s making a difference. It’s slowly changing church statistics. These churches are evaluating what really matters, and they are reaching skeptical, hurt, and broken people through serving. How are these churches changing the relationship between the church and their communities? How are they getting a skeptical society to hear them? They are externally focused, and this is what defines them:

They are inwardly strong but outwardly focused.

They integrate good deeds and good news into the life of the church.

They value impact and influence in the community more than attendance.

They seek to be salt, light, and leaven in the community.

They see themselves as the “soul” of the community.

They would be greatly missed by the community if they left.

Remember Show and Tell in third grade? It seems as if the church has become more concerned with telling than showing. Christians will tell others what they need to do to be right with God, to be better people. Christians will proclaim what isn't right with the world. Christians know how to tell about God's love and why it is needed in people's lives. For the most part, though, our churches have forgotten to *show* God's love. And all too often, what we do show doesn't match up with what we tell.

Today, whether we like it or not, we have to earn the right to be heard. As we've all heard many times, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." *Showing* through serving can help Christians and churches *tell* more effectively. The success of an externally focused church depends on getting involved in the community, creating authentic relationships, and being truly useful. In the process of showing, externally focused churches have discovered, again and again, that people are more willing to listen to their telling.

Who Is This Book For?

This book is written with two types of churches in mind. First is the *externally committed* church. These churches are already externally focused in what they do, but they want to learn what others are doing so they can excel even more. They want to increase the number of people deployed into the community where they can be salt, light, and leaven—agents of transformation. Or they may want to increase the frequency of service or the depth of that service—moving from service into *relationship*. They also want to learn how to leverage and increase their impact by beginning new ministries or partnering with existing efforts.

Second is the *externally curious* church. These churches have heard about this growing movement and want more information on how to become an externally focused church. They ask, "How did they do it?" and "How can we do it?" In both cases, by the end of the book we hope to have answered three questions:

- Why should we be an externally focused church?
- What are we trying to accomplish?
- How can we get started or improve on what we are doing?

The results of an externally focused ministry are not entirely predictable. It's certain that the church will get its feet wet and probably muddy. At the very least, it will have benefited the community through its service. By becoming externally focused, churches have the chance to build relational bridges, giving Christians opportunities to share God's grace in the midst of real need. In this way, the church can transform lives as people both see and hear God's grace at work in their world—a church that is showing *and* telling.

Endnotes

1. John Bruce, comments (San Leandro, CA: sermon at Creekside Community Church, May 11, 2003).
2. Erwin McManus, comments (San Diego, CA: National Outreach Convention, September 2003).

What Is an **Externally Focused** Church?

"There is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come."

—Victor Hugo

Ignited

In the summer of 2002, a number of forest fires burned out of control in Colorado for days at a time. The fire nearest to our community was between Denver and Estes Park in the Arapahoe National Forest. Although the fire was over twenty miles away, the sky above us was a cinnamon color, and smoke filled the air. With so much acreage burning and so much property destroyed, most of us assumed that it was the most important fire at the time. By the end of 2002, satellites recorded over a million fires around the globe that year¹—places of light and heat that, quite independently of one another, ignited because the conditions were right.

Few people observing a nearby fire realize that on the same day an average of over twenty-seven hundred fires are ablaze in the forests and grasslands elsewhere on earth. It is only from the perspective of space and time that patterns of such magnitude and significance can be seen. In the same way, pastors and Christian leaders all around the world are beginning to think differently

about church. Independently of one another, they are increasingly convinced that effectiveness is not measured by what happens inside the church but rather by the impact the people of the church have on their communities. They are engaging their communities with truth and grace, good news and good deeds. They are becoming the salt that preserves, the light that shines upon, and the leaven that transforms a community. But what they may not realize is that they are part of a growing global movement.

These are the externally focused churches. And we believe that the externally focused church is an idea whose time has come. One pastor expressed it this way: “Either God has caused this wave that we are riding, or we have formed a wave that God is blessing. In either case, the wave is here.” Are you ready to catch this wave?

Defining an Externally Focused Church

As we begin the story, it's probably best to begin with some definitions. We don't know of any churches that claim to be internally focused, but they exist all the same. Internally focused churches concentrate on getting people into the church and generating activity there. These churches may create powerful worship experiences, excel in teaching, offer thriving youth programs, and have vibrant small groups, but at the end of the day, what is measured is the number of people and activities within the church. These are good churches filled with good people. And what they do is vital but not sufficient for a healthy church. Worship, teaching, and personal devotions are absolutely necessary for building the internal capacity necessary to sustain an external focus, but if all the human and financial resources are expended inside the four walls of the church, then no matter how “spiritual” things may appear to be, something is missing.

In many churches today, people are rediscovering the majesty of God and expressing their praise through worship. Music is no longer just the warm-up for the message. There is expectancy that God inhabits the praises of his people (from Psalm 22:3, King James Version). But worship that is not manifested in how we live in relationship with others may be hollow. We aren't the first

ones to experience this. In the years preceding the Babylonian captivity, Isaiah had a message from God concerning Israel's "internal" focus—along with an exhortation to move beyond formal worship to true righteousness:

Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me...I cannot bear your evil assemblies...They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen...Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! *Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow* (from Isaiah 1:13-17, emphasis added).

Throughout this prophetic book, Isaiah exposes the inadequacy of the faith of people who focus on loving God but forget about loving man. Addressing the futility of prayers and fasting in the absence of concern for others, God says, "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him?" (Isaiah 58:6-7a).

Externally focused churches are internally strong, but they are oriented externally. Their external focus is reflected in those things for which they staff and budget. Because they engage their communities with the good works and good news of Jesus Christ, their communities are better places in which to live. These churches look for ways to be useful to their communities, to be a part of their hopes and dreams. They build bridges to their communities instead of walls around themselves. They don't shout at the dirty stream; they get in the water and begin cleaning it up. They determine their effectiveness not only by

**Whose lives are different
because of this church?**

internal measures—such as attendance, worship, teaching, and small groups—but also by external measures: the spiritual and societal effects they are having on the communities around them. Externally focused churches measure not only what can be counted but also what matters most—the impact they are having outside the four walls of the church. They ask, "Whose lives are different because of this church?" Nearly everything that is done inside the church should prepare and equip people not only for

personal growth but also for personal impact. Like every church, externally focused churches have their problems and challenges, but they are determined to make a difference in society. Internally focused churches help individuals, but externally focused churches change the world. Could your church change the world?

Who Is the Target Audience?

Of course, we need to ask, “Who is the recipient of all of this externally focused energy?” Pete Menconi, of Greenwood Community Church near Denver, recently said that an externally focused church must be externally focused everywhere it ministers, “from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria to the remotest part of the earth.” And he’s right. Greenwood has long been a leader in serving those outside the church through nearly fifty externally focused partner ministries. But this book is not about foreign missions per se (though it can and should have implications for church planters). This book addresses how a church relates to *the community in which it resides*.

Although everyone outside the church is a potential ministry focus, the externally focused church moves toward two specific groups. *The first group comprises those on the margins*. God has a special place in his heart for those on the margins of society—and a plan for his people to minister to these broken people. There are nearly four hundred biblical passages demonstrating God’s concern for orphans, widows, prisoners, aliens, the homeless, the poor, the hungry, the sick, and the disabled. “[God] defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:18-19).

God also made provisions in the law for his people to use special offerings to look out for those living on the edge. “At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year’s produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied” (Deuteronomy 14:28-29a). He commanded the farmers and vintners to not squeeze every bit of profit out of the land but always to leave some behind for the poor to harvest (Deuteronomy 24:19-22). And God

asks us to open our hearts and be generous. “Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land” (Deuteronomy 15:10-11). God cares for everyone who is made in his image, and he wants his church to do the same.

Micheal Elliott, president of Union Mission in Savannah, Georgia, makes the point that the homeless, the incarcerated, widows, orphans, and immigrants generally lack a social support system. As the largest social support system in the United States, the church has the potential to greatly expand the kingdom by providing social support for those who have none.²

Glen Kehrein is the founding director of Circle Urban Ministries in Chicago. For over twenty-five years, he and his family have been making a difference among the poor and needy in Chicago. He knows the joys and heartaches of ministering to those on the fringes. One evening over dinner, Glen told about going to hear a well-known authority present a seminar titled “Eight Characteristics of Healthy Churches.” The characteristics included evangelistic vitality, small groups, and dynamic worship. He returned from the seminar shaking his head, astonished that no mention was made of ministering to those on the margins whom God cares so much about. “How can you have a healthy church that has no concern for the poor?” Churches that are externally focused come alongside those in society who are under-resourced and disenfranchised.

John Perkins, the recognized founder of the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA), a national organization of urban ministers, says, “Not everyone is called to move to the inner-city to minister there, but everyone is called to have a heart for hurting people.”³ Are there people in your community who need an extra dose of mercy? Are there any hurting, broken people who long to be noticed and cared for? Erwin McManus, pastor of Mosaic in Los Angeles, says that the church “offers community to those who have no community.”⁴ The Scriptures say, “God sets the lonely in families” (Psalm 68:6). Are you willing to offer community to those who have no community? Are you willing to be family to those who have no families?

The second recipient of the externally focused church's energy is the city. Externally focused churches have moved past being angry with the city to wanting to be a blessing to the city. Much has been written about “taking back our cities” for God, but really, much of this is testosterone-driven language that reinforces the idea of being at war with the city.

This is not the language of Jesus. Probably the verse most of us remember from Jeremiah 29 is verse 11: “ ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’ ” This is the kind of verse everyone likes to hear. But have you ever gone back to the beginning of the passage? It’s really a message from God to those “Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon” (Jeremiah 29:1). The Israelites were now captive people living in foreign lands in what is now Iraq. God advises them how to live as strangers and aliens. He tells them to join in the life and rhythms of the city: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease” (Jeremiah 29:4-6).

The key verse in this message pertains to their relationship with the city: “Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. *Pray to the Lord for it* because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (verse 7, emphasis added). What? Pray for this godless, pagan city? You’ve got to be kidding! Nope. That’s what God said. So the believers were to do two things: actively seek the peace and prosperity of the city and pray for the city. (By the way, this is how both Daniel and Nehemiah gained such favor with the city’s inhabitants.) Externally focused churches look for ways to seek and promote the welfare of the city.

Most school districts face tough times. In 2001 Kansas City was hit by economic hardships and the accompanying sagging morale of teachers and administrators. The previous twenty years had seen eighteen superintendents come and seventeen of them leave. Rather than wringing his hands, Pastor Adam Hamilton of United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, decided to do something to bless his city. From the pulpit, he challenged teachers and administrators in his suburban congregation to

leave their suburban jobs and begin teaching in the inner city. He also had cards available, addressed to every employee of the Kansas City School District—all 5,700 of them. He challenged each person in attendance (approximately 5,700 people) to take a card, to pray for the person named on it, and, as God would lead, to write a note of encouragement and thanks to that teacher, administrator, custodian, or cafeteria worker. The cards weren't bulk-mailed from the church; rather, each person addressed and stamped a personal letter and included a personal return address on the envelope. Many included their phone numbers and offers to help.

The response of the teachers and staff was tremendous. They were overwhelmed by the encouragement and offers of support. Many contacted the individuals, and as a result, many members of the Church of the Resurrection are now involved in tutoring and reading programs in inner-city schools. Church of the Resurrection figured out a simple way to be a blessing to its community. This stuff is not rocket science. Any church of any size can be a blessing.

A Beautiful Thing

Do you remember Jesus' first miracle? He didn't raise someone from the dead. He didn't feed the multitudes or heal someone of a debilitating illness. He turned the water in six stone jars into fine wine at a wedding—simply because the host had run out of wine. Jesus “revealed his glory” by seeking the welfare of the host and guests of the wedding in Cana. His presence was a blessing to the wedding. Everyone was glad that Jesus showed up, but his act also led to spiritual transformation, as “his disciples put their faith in him” (John 2:11).

A young man walks toward a woman whose age is belied by the joy and sparkle in her eyes. The man extends his hand and asks the seated woman, “May I have this dance?” And so begins the Mariners' Senior Prom—an evening of dancing, food, and fun sponsored by the Lighthouse Ministry of Mariners Church in Irvine, California, for seniors from a convalescent home in the community. Young men dance with elderly women, and young women take the arms of older gentlemen. Walkers and canes are put away for the evening. For tonight is a night to dance—to feel the joy of youth, to hear music from days gone by.

Two hundred men and a smattering of women and children gather

around elevated television screens scattered throughout a room. It's Super Bowl Sunday. Tables and chairs are arranged for optimum viewing and optimum interaction, but men still jockey for the seats closest to the TV sets. On the tables are hot chicken wings, five-layer bean dip, meatballs, nachos, chips, guacamole, pizza—snacks befitting a world championship event. In the finest room Lake Avenue Church has to offer, the homeless have gathered for a Sunday afternoon in Pasadena. These are men whose candle is nearly extinguished. To be cheering for their team, to feel some sort of passion, reassures them that they are still alive. And for an afternoon at least, a community is created for those who have no community.

A dance and a Super Bowl party...what do they mean? Are they expressions of mercy? Are they expressions of justice? Maybe they simply reflect love—doing unto a neighbor what you'd like done for you if you were in his or her shoes. When a woman poured out a flask of perfume on Jesus, the disciples exclaimed indignantly, "Why this waste?...This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor" (Matthew 26:8-9). The spiritual bookkeepers of the world love a return on their investments, but what Jesus asks us to do can't be measured in those terms. Jesus replied to the disciples, "She has done a beautiful thing to me" (Matthew 26:10b). Sometimes things shouldn't be measured in terms of better and best, but of beauty.

Externally focused churches bring beauty to their communities. Their love is a garland of grace. They don't just hand out soup; sometimes they serve nachos. They don't just hand out winter coats; sometimes they help pick out a prom dress.

To be a blessing to their cities, externally focused churches go way beyond traditional methodologies. Through arts, drama, and sports, they create opportunities to influence the lives of children and youth. By offering classes to the community in public settings such as banks, hospitals, and hotel conference rooms, they equip emerging workforces with skills necessary to thrive.

Externally Focused Churches Are Not Limited by Size, Location, or Denomination

Size has nothing to do with a church's ability to be externally focused. The operative word is *focus*. Remember Jesus' words, "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20). Several years ago Scott Beck, the first franchisee and eventual chief operating officer of Blockbuster Video, was

Critical mass is one person with a vision.

addressing a group of ministry leaders. The discussion centered on the meaning of *critical mass*. Scott was asked, "What does it take to launch a venture...to get it off the ground?" Scott's answer was concise: "*Critical mass* is one person with a vision."⁵ Most likely, for your church to become externally focused, it will take one person with a vision. Perhaps that person is you!

Being externally focused has much more to do with mind-set than with size. In response to a request to relate the impact his church is having on its community, a pastor from a small town in central Florida excitedly talked about the church's work with recovering drug addicts. To provide work for these folks, the church started a construction business and an auto-repair shop. It obtained a contract to turn military Humvees into civilian vehicles. Every week members of the church also minister to prisoners in the local jail. One would think this man pastors a church of a thousand or more, but in reality it is a church of around 250! The church's membership is modest, but its impact is huge.

Location is not part of what it means to be externally focused. Although we often associate ministering to the needs of the community exclusively with the urban church, externally focused churches may be found in urban, rural, and suburban settings.⁶ This book is not written exclusively, or even primarily, for urban churches. Of the 340,000 churches in North America, tens of thousands are not located in an urban setting. To all of these churches we say, "Come, join us on the journey."

Externally focused churches are not determined by denomination or style. No single denomination has the inside track on external impact.

“Seeker-sensitive churches,” “purpose-driven churches,” “megachurches,” “equipping churches,” “multiethnic churches,” “house churches,” “connected churches,” and “multi-site churches” can all maintain their distinctive characteristics and still be externally focused. To be externally focused probably means returning to the reason your church was founded in the first place. Being externally focused cuts across all denominational and racial lines. Being externally focused is about *the perspective and purpose of the church* more than any program the church might engage in. Once a church decides to become externally focused by joining in the life and conversation of the community, the possibilities of *how* it engages the community are endless.

Four Characteristics of Externally Focused Churches

Externally focused churches 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 well-being of their communities. They believe that their communities, with all of their aspirations and challenges, cannot be truly healthy without the church's

They are not social workers but kingdom builders!

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 sub-consciously 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?⁷

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.”⁸ 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.⁹

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 woof 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 them-

selves 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. Want-

ing 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

Christians can learn through good instruction, but they really cannot grow if they remain uninvolved in ministry and service.

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 percent in 1991 to 43 percent in 2002.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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."¹³ 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."¹⁴

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.”¹⁵

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.

“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.”¹⁶ 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.

Two Strategies of Externally Focused Churches

First, a few comments about “models.” Models represent a simplified view of reality. Different models give us different options. Models can represent “what is” or “what could be.” The point we want to make about models is that there are a number of effective ways to engage your community with good news and good deeds. We will present a lot of models, but there is no “right” model. A good model is one that accomplishes the desired outcomes and is consistent with the heart and desires of our Lord. So look for principles within the models that you can apply.

Churches that are externally focused usually have variations of two strategies at their disposal. *First, they identify needs of their communities and start ministries or programs to meet those needs.* For example, they may start food banks, learning centers, or English as a Second Language (ESL) programs for immigrants. Experienced churches often form separate

nonprofit spin-offs under which a ministry can be organized. This separate 501(c)(3) status often allows them to receive outside corporate and government funding to get the resources required by large-scale endeavors such as affordable housing, food banks, and homes for unwed mothers.

Second, they partner with existing ministries or human-service agencies that are already accomplishing a shared mission in the community. Nearly every community has a number of human-service agencies that are morally positive and spiritually neutral and are doing their best to meet the needs of the underserved and under-resourced people of the community. Such agencies include the food bank, homeless shelter, emergency family housing, and safe house for abused women.

In addition, externally focused churches recognize that other church or parachurch ministries are effective in ministering to specific target audiences (such as youth, unwed mothers, and the unemployed). Rather than starting a new ministry, these human-service agencies and church or parachurch organizations can serve as “partner ministries” of a local congregation. Churches can simply join what is already happening in the community. Instead of each congregation having its own food pantry, why not partner with the local food bank? When hungry people request food, congregations refer these folks to their partner ministries. Likewise, when people come to the community food bank with more than a physical hunger, they are referred to one of the churches.

It Wasn't About the Donkey

Riding a donkey, Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The crowds cheered and shouted praises to him. They lopped off palm fronds and laid them on the ground for the donkey to walk on. When they ran out of palm branches, they gladly laid their own cloaks on the ground and, walking ahead of Jesus and the donkey, shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!” (Matthew 21:9). For a moment the donkey perhaps thought it was all about him. After all, he was doing all the work that morning. But it wasn't about him. It had nothing to do with him. He was simply carrying the Message.

The externally focused church is a good donkey that takes Jesus into

places where he hasn't always been welcome. The serving church is just the donkey. It's still all about Jesus. We're glad you are joining us on this journey. The fire that is spreading is a good fire. Lives will be saved, not harmed. It's going to be a great ride.

Something to **Think** About

“Externally focused churches measure not only what can be counted but also what matters most.” After reading this chapter, what do you think matters to God in this world? What really matters to you?

Something to **Talk** About

1. When was the last time you were really proud of what your church was doing?
2. Is your church an internally focused church or an externally focused church? How can you tell?
3. Can you imagine how different your community would be if every follower of Christ in every church in your community began loving and serving others in a meaningful way?
4. What do you think would happen in the lives of the followers?
5. What do you think would happen in the churches?
6. What do you think would happen to the community?

Something to **Act** Upon

1. If “*critical mass* is one person with a vision,” is it possible that you are that person? Why or why not?
2. After reading this chapter, what possibilities come to mind about what your church could become?
3. Who could you talk to about joining you in exploring new possibilities?

Sermon/**Lesson** Idea

Text: Isaiah 58:1-12

Main Idea: Isaiah 58 addresses two types of people and two types of churches: those that are internally focused, as illustrated by fasting and seeking God but doing nothing about the needs around them, and those that are externally focused, as demonstrated by their giving themselves in service to others.

Illustration: Jesus' ministry of good news and good deeds (Acts 10:36-38)

Action Point: Will you accept the challenge to become an externally focused church?

Endnotes

1. Ivan Csiszar, Ph.D, written comments (University of Maryland, February 5, 2004).
2. Micheal Elliott, comments (Savannah, GA: conversation with Eric Swanson at Union Mission, February 3, 2004).
3. John Perkins, comments (Pasadena, CA: CCDA conference, Lake Avenue Community Church, November 2002).
4. Erwin Raphael McManus, comments (Los Angeles, CA: conversation at Mosaic with Eric Swanson, May 22, 2002).
5. Scott Beck, comments (Fort Collins, CO: meeting attended by regional directors of Campus Crusade for Christ and Eric Swanson, Colorado State University, June 28, 1995).
6. There are many fine books that focus on the needs of burgeoning cities and the role the church can play in ministering to them. In the list of resources (see page 224), we have included several good books written by the leaders and practitioners of urban ministry that may be helpful to people faced with the specific challenges of urban locations.

It is interesting to note that for African-American churches, an external focus is not new. They have never differentiated between effective evangelism and efforts to meet the needs of those around them. A study of 2,150 black churches by C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya described in their book *The Black Church in the African American Experience* reports that nearly 70 percent of the total sample of black churches are involved with social [service] agencies or other nonchurch programs in dealing with community problems. New York City churches such as Concord Baptist Church of

Christ, Allen AME, Abyssinian Baptist, and Bethel Gospel Assembly, and Los Angeles churches such as First AME, Faithful Central Bible Church, and West Angeles COGIC, have led the way in transforming and preserving their communities.

7. Keith Zafren, comments (San Jose, CA: in a sermon titled "A Church in the City for the City," River Church Community, May 5, 2002).
8. Epistle of Mathetus to Diognetus, chapter 6, verse 25, www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-01/anf01-08.htm#P679_123511
9. 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.
10. Barna research online: www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PageCategory.asp?CategoryID=10
11. Barna Research Group, results of telephone poll.
12. Hartford, CT: Hartford Seminary/Faith Communities Today (FACT) study: www.fact.hartsem.edu/executive_summary.htm
13. American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), 2001.
14. Hartford, CT: FACT study.
15. Charles Roesel, comments (Leesburg, FL: conversation with Eric Swanson at First Baptist Church, April 8, 2003).
16. Steve Sjogren, comments (Cincinnati, OH: conversation with Eric Swanson, Vineyard Community Church, May 6, 2003).



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