

The Journey from Being a Stranger to a Missionary in Your Neighborhood

The day before I left for Haiti, I hastily posted my [“from strangers to missionaries”](#) article. Had I known it would be read so much, I would have taken longer than 30 minutes to write it! Oh well. Since then, I have received a lot of feedback from folks—some asking questions and others wondering what it would look like in their context. This post is dedicated to think through practical application and fleshing it out in practice.

1. Leverage the Limits of Our Relationships

Have you ever heard of [Dunbar’s Number](#)? According to Robin Dunbar, there is a maximum number of relationships a person can have due to cognitive limitations and social group sizes. According to Dunbar, the average person can have a maximum of 150 meaningful relationships with a broader range of 100-230 relationships. The larger the number, the more restrictive or superficial the relationships become.

I would venture to say that most of us don’t think very strategically about the limitations of our relationships. Of course we have our immediate relations to our family and extended family. Beyond that we have our friends and church family. Once you factor in the “given’s”, the number of available meaningful relationships is relatively small. That means we need to be careful in how we invest our lives cognitively and missionally for the sake of the gospel.

Knowing these limitations, why not come up with a plan on how to leverage your relational margin for the sake of gospel advance? How many relationships could be acquaintances? Neighbors? Friends? You can’t change the world with 500 relationships, but you can change a neighborhood with 10. I fear the problem with most of us that we have failed to consider these limitations and leverage our relational margin at all for gospel causes. To correct that, we need to begin with examining our relationships and make efforts to demonstrate personal hospitality, receptivity, and availability for God to use us in the lives of others.

2. Assess Busyness and Make Missional Margin

A key factor with many of us is that our lives are too complex and too busy. We simply don’t have time. Does life have to look like a rat race or exhausting treadmill? I don’t think so. Five years ago I wrote about being [too busy not to evangelize](#), and I followed up with [some ways to create missional margin](#) in your life. Woody Allen once said that 80% of success is just showing up. We need to be present, and present with a purpose to live with others, love them, and lean into the kingdom under the leadership of the Spirit to magnify Jesus.

3. Create a Practical Way of Measuring Movement

In the sphere of 150 possible relationships, I hope that there would be people who are neighbors, acquaintances, friends, family, and missionaries. In every relationship, I hope to see movement toward knowing and becoming like Jesus. All of my [“relationship investments”](#)

should be stewarded for pointing people to Jesus, to beholding Jesus, and to becoming like Jesus.

One of the most practical ways I try to chart movement is through my [missional moleskine](#). This is my city travelogue in which I journal my way into the lives of others, asking God to use me through rhythms of life in ordinary ways to impact ordinary people with the amazingly good news of Jesus Christ. It could be a prayer, a gospel conversation, learning their story, or simply being present and letting them know I want to be a part of their life (and doing so not in a hurry or looking at my cell phone!). Whatever you use, it is important to measure movement in the same way you journal prayer requests and how God answers them. Looking back, you will be filled with gratitude that God uses little things, little moments, and “little people” to accomplish His work.

4. Remember Your Identity in Christ and Union with Christ

This may not sound practical, but it is probably most practical of all. You see, we know who we are when we are in a church gathering. We are worshippers of Jesus. But our identity as a worshipper, disciple, servant, and missionary does not end when we are not in a church gathering! The reality, however, is that we have an evangelical norm where our identities in Christ are nonexistent in the normal course of life so that we go about our daily living forgetting who we are. When I’m in a cross-cultural context like I was last week (Haiti), I am reminded constantly that I am a missionary and a servant. It’s obvious. But why isn’t that so obvious in my hometown with my own people? Could it be that I’ve adopted a way of living that recognizes Jesus in emergencies or mountaintops but forgets him in the daily grind? Isn’t that where I need Him most and need to be reminded of who I am because of what He did for me?

Let’s face it. The world is an intimidating domain of darkness. It lies in the power of the evil one. We are faced with temptations from within and trials from without. The easiest thing to do would be to find a “safe” place and hunker down until Jesus returns. The unfortunate reality, however, is Jesus does not present that as an option for His people. We *are* a city on a hill whose light cannot be hidden. We *are* His ambassadors with the message of reconciliation. Instead of fearing the world’s influence on us, we should carry on in faith, constantly reminded of the Father’s providence for us, the Son’s purchase of us, and the Spirit’s power in us every step of the way. The Lord is my light and my salvation! Whom shall I fear?

5. Be Prepared to Be Disappointed and Heartbroken in the Mission

Jesus knew what it was like to be on mission and experience heartache, disappointment, and betrayal. Paul knew what it was like to make it his ambition to preach the gospel where Christ is not named only to end his life confessing that everyone there had turned away from him. Jesus finished His mission. Paul kept the faith and fought the good fight. We cannot think that investing our lives in others for the sake of the gospel will come without pain, hurt, and heartache. It’s going to happen, but we cannot shut our hearts and shut down the work. Persevering in the mission comes when we understand how much and how deeply we have been loved by God. Only the gospel can fuel you with motivation to pick up the pieces of a broken heart to love lost, broken, rebellious sinners the way God loved you. In your kindness,

God works to bring them to repentance.

In my next post, I will offer some more thoughts on fleshing it out and answering specific questions that I've received. If you have questions or struggles, please share. We are all learning together. I need to live this out more than anyone else. May God help us to put feet to these aspirations and use us for His glory!

Read more from Timmy [here](#).