

**THE CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT AND MINISTRY OF  
VINEYARD CENTRAL COMMUNITY CHURCH OF  
NORWOOD, OHIO**

By

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## **Introduction**

The ministry context in which God has called me is in urban, mid-Western America. Specifically, my wife, daughter, and I moved from Pasadena, CA to Norwood, OH five months ago. We moved here in January, it was cold, dreary, and we longed for California weather. But we moved here with a purpose, a mission. This calling has (at least) two parts that we were aware of when we moved. First, this past October 29 we gave birth to our first child, Cloanna Jayne Klinefelter. We had always planned on moving back to the mid-west when we had kids. God seemed to be arranging this to happen. In December, we moved from Pasadena to my parent's home in Kentucky and eventually an hour and a half north to Cincinnati, OH. This is all part of our calling to raise a family in a stable environment, near family and in community. The second part of the call is my passion to lead the church in fresh ways of experiencing the gospel in a new generation. I feel a very distinctive missional pull in my spirit as I consider what Christ desires for his body.

These two realities of call have led us to Vineyard Central Community Church (VC). VC is a network of house churches based in of Norwood, OH. This community and its faithful leaders share my concern for missional engagement and have taken definitive steps to welcome the marginalized and the left-out. Norwood is a very unique and interesting neighborhood. Norwood is completely surrounded by Cincinnati and is an economically depressed part of town. Further, Norwood is culturally (or at least sub-culturally) diverse. We have a growing Hispanic population as well as the traditional blue-collar working families. There are increasingly couples and young families moving to Norwood because of its location (it is near a really nice, upper-class part of town) and the houses have been less expensive. The class differences run very deep here. This is the neighborhood VC calls home.

We do not call it home because we commute in to the city from the suburbs in order to “do mission”. Rather, several of us live in one of two community houses. We are intentionally and purposefully joining our lives with others for the living out of both aspects of our discerned call. We are providing community and stability for Cloanna and our family. We are actively engaging the people of our neighborhood and city with the gospel. Admittedly, we are not always as active or as engaging as we would like to be, but I believe God honors our intent and our slow, but steady, movement in this direction.

### **Our Cross-Cultural Context**

In our urban, post-modern, mid-western American context we are confronted with a unique situation. As ministers of the gospel, my wife and I (as well as the other leaders of our community) have grown up in essentially the same culture as those with whom we are endeavoring to minister. However, I am fully convinced that we are actively part of cross-cultural ministry in all that we do even here in Norwood, Ohio. This is evident in at least two areas. First, the massive effects of the postmodern shift in our society have rendered our culture fragmented, pluralistic, and diverse. Without going into the nuanced discussion of whether we live in a truly post-modern era or another phase of modernity, it seems obvious enough that our Western world has and continues to undergo systemic and seismic change. The cultural center of Christendom was replaced by the Enlightenment pursuit of the “autonomous, rational mind” (Roxburgh 1997: 9) as the new center. Unfortunately, this assumed new center was unstable. We are left with an untenable situation in which we are culturally adrift, without moorings. We are without grand narratives that unify and captivate our collective social consciousness (cf. Roxburgh 1997: 9-13).

If this cultural plurality and heterogeneity is truly the case in our context, which of course I assert that it is, then all of our ministry is cross-cultural. All in our society are

living from a place of cultural discontinuity and almost every action we undertake is an exercise in cultural negotiation of competing narratives. This leads to the second aspect of cross-cultural ministry in Norwood and Vineyard Central. Because of the cultural plurality, there are many sub-sets of persons within our neighborhood that have drastically different needs and perspectives. Some of these sub-groupings of people within one mile from our home include; Immigrant Hispanics, African Americans, White Appalachian blue-collar families, the “working poor” (which cuts across several of these sub-groupings), upper middle-class college students at a Jesuit university (Xavier), middle to upper middle-class families who moved to Norwood because of lower housing costs, and the artist/musician community. There are probably more groupings of people as well, but this gives a taste of the diversity with which we live. Presently, VC is primarily connected with the artist/musician community and the middle-class families that have moved into Norwood in the last 10 years. It is a challenge to effectively form a People of God in such a diverse place.

### **Barriers to Cross-Cultural Ministry**

The receivers of our cross-cultural ministry are multitudinous and fragmented. It is difficult to be “receptor-oriented” (Kraft 1996: 420) in such a society. The sheer diversity, not to mention number, of receptors is daunting. This is a challenging task for Vineyard Central and for me. The divisions between sub-cultures in Norwood seem to be particularly deep and difficult. VC is fully committed to living incarnationally in the neighborhood and working to restore and renew it. From what I observed the people who call VC home are deeply caring and desire to connect with persons in the neighborhood, but they (nor I) want to do it artificially or inauthentically.

There are (at least) two barriers that need to be addressed, both for Vineyard Central and for me, to authentically engage West Norwood in mission. These barriers

can and must be overcome if we are to have a future in this place. Location must matter. Otherwise, Vineyard Central is no different from the myriad of suburban churches that took flight from the urban core in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. It will only appear different externally, instead of fleeing the city to the promised land of suburbia; it will cloister itself into a homogenous unit of postmodern artist, musicians, and disenfranchised “mega-churchers”. This, I am convinced, is not God’s desire for VC. But it is a temptation that must be addressed and faced. The lifeblood of the church must be found if it embraces its true nature. That nature is inherently missional, for we serve a missionary God and are called to be a missionary people (Bosch 1995: 32).

This in mind, the first barrier to an engaging mission to the neighborhood is the fragmentation of contemporary lives. This is a reality for both those in VC and in the neighborhood. The reality of this fragmentation occurred to me during our Memorial Day Block Party that our house church hosted. We pulled together and got a table full of food, complete with incredible tamales from the “Tamale Lady”. We had “corn-hole”, a locally popular game similar to horseshoes, but with beanbags and boards with holes, and four-square. We had a good turn-out and a wonderful time of fellowship and meeting a few of the folks on the street. It was a very good event for us a small and burgeoning community of faith, one that seemed to solidify and deepen relationships. The fragmentation insight occurred to me as I was walking down the street during the party. I went to several nearby homes to see if anyone was home, partly to invite them, partly to ask to borrow their basketball goal. No one was home. This being Memorial Day, that was not unexpected. People gather with family and friends at various locations, naturally leaving their homes vacant. However, I was struck by the fact that we as a society are always going places. It is difficult to get to know your neighbors if your neighbors are rarely home! We live in a mobile society. We are led to believe that this is an intensely good thing. Cell phones, PDAs, laptops, and WI-FI (all gadgets which I have) keep us in

motion and artificially connected, but not really in touch. Jobs that require us to be gone from home more than we are at home make it challenging, if not impossible, to build deeply personal relationships with those people next-door.

I can raise this question, one that I am infected by as well, but I do not know how to answer it. Perhaps we should just accept the reality and work to build meaningful relationship at those locations (work or school) where we spend most of our time. This is not a satisfying alternative, though. Those other places have agendas that run counter to long personal conversations and life-transforming encounters with the Holy Spirit. I'm not saying that there is not value in work-place evangelism (in the best sense of the term) or lunch-break Bible study, but can this really be the best the so-called Christian community can hope for in our world today? I hope not. How can we truly live in our neighborhoods (and for that matter work in our workplaces) in such a way that smells of the gospel? What disciplines should we undertake? From which technologies should we abstain?

This leads to the second barrier, the issue of common space, both indoor and outdoor. One of the challenges of living in the mid-west is the winter. Not just because we moved here from California, but from mid-November till early April the streets are practically barren. There seems to be very little local, indoor common space where people from the neighborhood can mix and mingle.

The problem is not instantly solved by warmer weather. Though people are out of their homes more, there is not outdoor common space that is convenient, safe, and comfortable for all people. Zygmunt Bauman addresses this pervasive crisis of space (and time) in *Liquid Modernity*.

The ability to live with differences, let alone to enjoy such living and to benefit from it, does not come easily and certainly not under its own impetus. This ability is an art which, like all arts, requires study and exercise" (2000: 106).

As the People of God in this place we must learn this art. We are not here for ourselves. We are God's reconciling ambassadors of the Kingdom. Again, there are no easy answers. This is a systemic and societal issue, one not fixed with clever programs and catchy "mission statements". One ray of hope in this area may be Ray Oldenburg's concept of a "third place" (1999: *xvii*). "These are informal public gathering places. These places serve community best to the extent that they are inclusive and local" (*ibid*, emphasis in original). Perhaps efforts directed to the creation of such places in the neighborhood will reap benefits of which we know not. Our fragmentation as a neighborhood could be significantly diminished if there were places where rich and poor, young and old, Hispanic, blue-collar, and "cubicle jockey" could mix and mingle and share a drink.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we have seen how a pluralistic culture deeply impacts both the receivers of the gospel, as well as those who would be its advocates. As ministers of the gospel in such a diverse neighborhood, it is important to look at the cultural assumptions that we bring to the table. We should be careful of our American individualism which could lead us to a form of "absolute relativism" (Kraft 1996: 17), where everything and anything goes. We do have a gospel, a good news story that is both truly good and actual news (and a story!). We should not be ashamed of sharing it. We should also not be afraid of incarnating it our lives. This is the only true way the gospel can be shared anyway.

As this is a reality, we will find opportunity and responsibility for using the cultural structures and forms of the people with which we minister. This is one of the reasons house churching is an appropriate form for our neighborhood. With the diversity of perspectives it is possible for people to come together with others with whom they

relate and form a church. But it is also important for us to be cognizant of other forms which God would have us use for the proliferation of his good news. These may look different than a house church, or a traditional church, or a seeker-sensitive church. We will only discover these new forms as we spend time with those in our context. To do so, we need to be attentive to the barriers that prevent this from happening. We need to be attentive to our cultural assumptions that hinder us from God's Reality, his Kingdom. May it come, on earth as in heaven.

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