

FOREWORD



After 20 years of normal Sunday-based church experience, I moved to a new town with a handful of friends to start an intentional community of missionaries. We were partially motivated by our love of lost people, and equally motivated by a desire to experience more of God. We wanted to wake up every morning with the expectation that God had plans for us and that those plans would change the course of history for our friends.

It happened! Homes filled up, friends found faith in Jesus, and we began to see and feel the presence of God changing us to the core. Adullam is now a congregational network of missional communities and the several hundred people who belong to it would say, “We can’t go back.”

But, we also failed a lot. Whereas the size of our movement is credible, it’s not nearly what it could have been if we had had a little help along the way; a little coaching, or a mentor-guide who had previously traversed the landscape we were trailblazing.

When I read this book, my first thought was, “Shucks, this could have saved us a lot of misery.” Mike Breen and the entire 3DM team have emerged as expert coaches and practitioners to anyone who is sniffing the flower of missional community, true spiritual formation, and kingdom practices. This short, simple book is an overflow of their experience and practical wisdom, and should be a plumb line for every leader and every church that wants to make disciples of Jesus.

Regardless of your context or church paradigm, this book is foundational and will help you set new rails, new rhythms, and new practices that God will bless.

— Hugh Halter, author of *The Tangible Kingdom* and *AND: the Gathered and Scattered Church*.

PREFACE



Our previous book on Missional Communities (MCs), *Launching Missional Communities*, was a helpful tool for guiding church leaders toward understanding and pioneering MCs.

However, as we coached and consulted with pastors and church leaders over the past several years in our Learning Communities, we discovered something. It's one thing to learn how to *launch* MCs, but another thing entirely to learn how to *lead* them well so they become a reproducing hotbed for discipleship and mission in churches.

For this reason, we decided to go back to the drawing board and write a book that focused on the processes and principles of leading an MC so that it can multiply in a healthy way. Our overarching goal is to put discipleship and mission back into the hands of ordinary people. So, this book is written with the ordinary person in mind. We hope that everyone can use this book to learn the basic principles of launching, leading, and multiplying MCs. We hope you enjoy reading it and trying it out!

PART 1
FOUNDATIONS FOR
MCs

UNDERSTANDING MCs AND *OIKOS*

A FEAST FOR EVERYONE

It's almost noon, and the house is saturated with the rich scent of roasted turkey, sweet potatoes, and pumpkin pie. Every family or friend invited prepared and brought food to share with everyone else. A few people came over early to help Mom and Dad make sure the house was ready for guests.

Some of the adults and older children are finishing up a game of touch football in the backyard while a few of the younger kids play tag. Your uncle brought a friend from work, a die-hard Detroit Lions fan who is glued to the TV with a couple of other people taking in the pregame show. Several others are talking in the kitchen as they put the finishing touches on the Thanksgiving feast they will all be eating in 20 minutes or so.

After sitting down at the table with one another for a laid-back, longer-than-usual lunch filled with laughter and connection, the day will continue—together. Some will begin putting away leftovers and washing the dishes. Some will immediately settle into chairs and couches for the football game (and probably a nap). Some will go back outside to play more touch football. Some will strike up conversations with cousins they haven't seen in a while.

Eventually, those who are hungry will get the leftovers back out for an informal supper. Some will be reading a beloved book on the couch, while others will be talking. The gathering will last well into the evening. Some will need to go home; others will spend the night. Before adjourning, they'll make plans to do things tomorrow.

This portrait of an extended family celebrating Thanksgiving is a distinctly American story, of course, but the same basic plot exists across the globe. The language, food, and geography may be different, but the theme is the same.

EXTENDED FAMILIES ON MISSION

It may sound strange to start talking about Missional Communities by talking about an extended family gathering around the Thanksgiving table. But that's where we have to begin. Why? Because, ultimately, **we don't want to talk about Missional Communities. We want to talk about family.**

Bear with us as we explain ourselves a bit.

MCs ARE NOT a silver bullet that will solve all of the church's missional problems. • Missional Communities (MCs) are a hot topic right now in the church, and many are excited about the potential of MCs to help the church live out its mission in the world. We began using MCs in the 1990s and are now helping to lead the church in implementing them. (That's probably why you're reading this book.) However, **MCs are not a silver bullet** that will solve all of the church's missional problems. Although MCs are not the destination, they are enormously valuable, because MCs are a structure that helps us get to our true goal, **something we call *oikos*.**

Oikos is a Greek word used in the New Testament to refer to "households," which were essentially extended families who functioned together with a common purpose. In the early church, discipleship and mission always centered around and flourished in the *oikos*. This vehicle facilitated the relational dynamic that allowed the church to thrive in the midst of persecution and hardship for hundreds of years. *Oikos* still helps the church thrive today, even in places where persecution is quite severe. We are absolutely convinced that *oikos* is what the church needs to reclaim if it is going to become the kind of movement the church was in its earliest days.

In fact, living as *oikos* has been the norm for almost every culture for most of human history. It's just how family was—not 2.4 children in a single-family home but a wider community sharing life and work and celebration and commerce together. Only in the last hundred years or so in the West have

we lost this sense of being extended families on mission. For a whole host of reasons, we have unwittingly embraced the fragmentation of the extended family and tried to live primarily as individuals and nuclear families. The results of this experiment have been utterly disastrous, and you probably see the aftermath all around you. Loneliness and depression are rampant, we are more stressed and busier than ever, and many people feel they are barely keeping their heads above water as they try to advance in their careers, raise their children, and seek some semblance of meaning in life.

In the midst of this sea of chaos and confusion, however, those of us who follow Christ have the remarkable opportunity to literally rebuild society by re-forming “extended family” *oikos* communities centered not on blood or ancestry, but on Jesus. Our commission is to compassionately reach out to those around us, invite them to join us in community, share the story of the gospel, make disciples, and gather them into families to follow Jesus together. That’s really what starting an MC is all about. This is not a fad or the latest church growth technique or a new name for cell groups. It is rediscovering the church as *oikos*, an extended family on mission where everyone contributes and everyone is supported.

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So, it isn’t that MCs aren’t important. They are, and that’s why we wrote this book. But MCs are simply the initial vehicle we learn to drive that gets us to the real destination: learning to live as *oikos*, extended families functioning together on mission with God. MCs are the training wheels that teach us how to ride the bike of *oikos*. They are the scaffolding that allows us to rebuild the household of *oikos*. MCs are the cocoon that allows the butterfly of *oikos* to emerge. You get the picture. In fact, we think that in 50 years, people will look back and say, “It’s hilarious—they used to make people join MCs because they didn’t know how to do this! Isn’t that amazing?”

We believe *oikos* is something the Spirit of God is doing in this time to restore the church’s ability to function fruitfully in discipleship and mission the way the early church did, publicly living out our faith in the various neighborhoods and relational networks of our cities. We firmly believe this is *the* make-or-break issue for the Western church. We simply will not see God’s dream for

the world come true unless we learn how to function as extended families on mission.

The good news is that it isn't actually that complicated, and God will give us the power to do it. This isn't a task reserved for church leaders, pastors, or experts—it's for everyone! When MCs are led well, they are an extremely effective vehicle for training ordinary people to follow Jesus together and re-learn *oikos*, so we want to equip you as practically as possible to do this. But remember: The goal is not to run a program called "Missional Community." The goal is to learn how to function as an extended family on mission. We really believe this is something *everyone* can learn to do.

Think of it like this: MCs are a great vehicle with a powerful engine (discipleship, but we'll get to that in a bit), but the thing about a vehicle is that it's supposed to take you somewhere. The destination the vehicle of MC takes us to is *oikos*. To drive successfully and purposefully, you need to know where you're going, and you need to know how to drive the vehicle. That's what you'll find in this book.

A quote widely attributed to Margaret Mead captures the idea well: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed [people] can change the world. Indeed it's the only thing that ever has."¹

Consider this your invitation to join a movement to change the world by simply building an extended family on mission.

WHAT IS A MISSIONAL COMMUNITY?

Before we dive into the principles and practicalities of starting and leading MCs, we need to start by defining what an MC is and describe some of the features that distinguish it from other kinds of vehicles the church has used. "Missional Community" has become a bit of a buzzword in the church, and people have used the term in a variety of ways. However, when we talk about MCs, we are talking about something quite specific. Here's our definition:

A Missional Community is a group of approximately **20 to 40 people** who are seeking to **reach a particular neighborhood or network of relationships with the good news of Jesus**. The group functions as a flexible, local

expression of the church and has the expressed intention of seeing those they are in relationship with become followers of Jesus with them. They exist to see God's Kingdom come to their friends and neighbors. The result is usually the growth of the MC (as people become followers of Jesus and join them) and then the multiplication of new MCs (as people are trained to lead within the MC and then are sent out to start new MCs). They are networked within a larger church community, allowing for a "scattered" and "gathered" expression of church.

These **lightweight, low-maintenance**, mid-sized communities, **led by lay people**, typically have three to four "official" meetings per month in their missional context. (This means that *when* they meet, *where* they meet, *with whom* they meet, and *what they do* when they meet are highly contextualized, determined by the vision and missional context of the MC.) Because they hold a strong value of "doing life" together, the people in the MC often meet with one another outside the "official" gatherings in more informal settings during the week. In structured and spontaneous ways, each MC **attends to the three dimensions of life** that Jesus himself attended to: time with God through worship, prayer, Scripture, teaching, giving thanks, etc. (what we call UP); time with the body of believers, building a vibrant and caring community (what we call IN); and time with those who don't know Jesus yet (what we call OUT).

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Let's break this down into **five characteristics** that will make MCs easy to define.

1) 20 – 40 PEOPLE

This is an approximate figure rather than a hard rule, because MCs vary in size depending on culture and context. We'll talk more about this later in the book, but for now, note that size *does* matter in MCs. They must be *mid-sized* communities, bigger than small groups but smaller than whole churches, because they must be **small enough to care but also big enough to dare**. What do we mean by this?

MCs are **small enough to care** because a group of 20–40 feels like an

extended family where everyone can be known and loved and contribute meaningfully to the community. Because an MC is generally smaller than a whole church, it is much easier for individuals to find a place of belonging and feel like they are a vital part of a community. The small size also creates a more comfortable environment for a new person coming into the community, because 20–40 people create a “house party” dynamic that provides a semi-anonymous space in the community for people to hang out on the margins and observe before they move in closer for more in-depth participation. Small groups of six to 12 people don’t have this kind of space, and visiting a group of this size is often quite intimidating for a new person.

MCs MUST BE small enough to care, but big enough to dare. • MCs are **big enough to dare** because a group of 20–40 people has enough human resource to substantively impact their chosen mission context, whether it’s a neighborhood or a network of relationships. In other words, they can get more done because there are more people involved than in a small group! In

addition, multiplication is much easier with a group of 20–40 people. One of the reasons small groups don’t tend to multiply is that people don’t want to part with the close friends they’ve cultivated in the small group. Multiplying an MC, however, allows you to continue the journey with your closest friends while still expanding the Kingdom of God by fulfilling the Great Commission.

2) CLEAR MISSION VISION

It is vital that an MC gathers around a vision for mission *from the beginning*. If you don’t have a well-defined missional vision at the start of an MC’s life, it is difficult to bring a vision in later, because the group almost always becomes a social club for Christians or a Bible study. Missional vision means you have a desire and passion to share the good news of Jesus with a specific group of

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• people through your words and your actions. Clearly seeing and articulating this vision is the **magnet** that draws people to the community and the **engine** that keeps the community moving.

• Missional vision is focused on *sharing the good news of Jesus* and *making disciples* among the people of a specific **neighborhood** or **network of relationships**. A neighborhood-focused MC centers on serving and bringing the good news of Jesus to the people who

live or work in a particular geographic area (e.g., a housing subdivision or a few blocks of streets). A network-focused MC seeks to serve and bring the good news of Jesus to the people within a particular network of relationships (e.g., a sports club, creative professionals, a hobby group, a business community, students, a subculture in the city, etc.). Giving your MC a specific name, perhaps related to its vision, often helps to keep the vision forefront in people's minds, and establishes a sense of identity and belonging within the MC.

As we think about bringing the good news to people in a neighborhood or relational network, remember that an MC doesn't just swoop in and do a few activities for a group and then leave. The MC emphasizes living among and working with the people or place they are seeking to impact. This "incarnational principle" helps prevent MCs from becoming a series of service projects performed by people who are disconnected relationally from those they are serving.

"The most vigorous forms of community are those that come together in the context of a shared ordeal or communities who define themselves as a group with a mission that lies beyond themselves — thus initiating a risky journey. Over-concern with safety and security, combined with comfort and convenience, have lulled us out of our true calling and purpose."

— Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost, *The Forgotten Ways*

3) LIGHTWEIGHT / LOW-MAINTANENCE

Every effort should be put into making MCs as lightweight and low maintenance as possible. This means they are inexpensive to run, not too time-consuming to plan, and not bound by building or maintenance costs. Leading an MC shouldn't be a heavy burden on a leader. People with normal "9-5 jobs" should be able to lead them. For example, MC gatherings shouldn't attempt to replicate a church worship service, because those take a lot of time and hard work to plan and maintain! Instead, look to implement regular, sustainable rhythms that allow people to connect as family. (More on this later, but what we're talking about is "recycling" time by missionally focusing the activities we are already involved in, rather than adding more events and extra commitments to the calendar.) Build a team around you to help lead and organize the various aspects of the community, releasing the body of Christ to function well together.

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- Remember this is about building an extended
- family on mission together, so let the idea of “family
- rhythms” guide your thinking. Have everyone bring
- food to share for meals together. Maybe have some
- people come over early to help clean up the house
- before the others arrive. Have everyone stick around
- afterward to do the dishes and help clean up—like a
- family would! **It's about learning to live a missional**
- **lifestyle together, not attending a series of**
- **missional events.**

4) AN ACCOUNTABLE LEADER

MCs are led by leaders with vision, but those leaders are **accountable to and supported by the leadership of the wider church**. MCs are not church plants (at least not in the traditional sense). They continue to be part of a larger whole, orbiting a central church, where they receive training and support. This creates a **low-control, high-accountability** dynamic that is vital to MC health. **Low control** means that the vision for the MC comes from the leader of the MC, not the central church leadership. **High accountability** means that the central church leadership is very involved in helping the MC leader carry out the vision God has given him or her. The MCs become places of on-the-ground mission for the people of God, dispersed among the neighborhoods and networks of a city, but still orbiting a central church, which becomes a place of training, equipping, prayer, resourcing, and encouragement for the MCs.

Each MC has a regular orbit around the central church, depending on the MC's context and needs. Some communities come to Sunday gatherings most weeks and meet in their mission context mostly on weekdays. Other communities may meet in their mission context most weekends and come to a Sunday gathering just once a month—or anything in between! Again, this is determined by the vision and mission context of the MC, and is agreed on in a dialogue between the MC leader and the church leadership.

5) UP / IN / OUT RHYTHM

MCs center their rhythms on growing in relationship with God (UP), with one another (IN), and with those they are reaching out to (OUT). This is community

life centered on the Great Commandment and the Great Commission:

- “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind soul and strength” (UP).
- “Love your neighbor as yourself” (IN).
- “Go and make disciples of all people groups” (OUT).

Again, remember that we are not talking about merely scheduling a series of events for people to attend. We are talking about communicating vision and establishing rhythms and routines that allow us to become an extended family on mission together. To do this, we need rhythms that connect us with God in worship and prayer (UP), with each other in deeper community (IN), and with those in our mission context in love and service (OUT).

These are the key characteristics that define successful MCs. Now let's move on to foundations upon which MCs are built.

