

CHURCH IN THE MISSIONAL MODE

MIKE FROST

THE SUBTERRANEAN SHOE ROOM IS A VERY COOL RETRO-SHOE STORE IN SAN FRANCISCO. It was opened this year by an unlikely proprietor. Brock Bingaman is a church planter who came to town with every intention of planting a conventional church. He had planted churches before and one conversation with him reveals that he's an evangelist to his bootstraps. But San Francisco is crawling with failed conventional church planters. The traditional Church is withering on the vine. Crestfallen, young Brock realised that there was no point trying to re-create what many had tried and failed at before him. Needing gainful employment, Brock says he turned to his first love: shoes!

Ever since he was a boy he has collected shoes. He loves the darn things. Together with his brother Josh and their wives, he rented a shop and filled it with new and retro (restored second-hand) shoes. Now the Subterranean is doing a roaring trade. Brock has a special gift when it comes to shoes, though. He strikes up a conversation with those who browse his collection and when they tell him they're not sure what they're looking for, he has a standard retort. "Tell me about yourself and I'll tell you what shoes you need." And so scores of San Franciscans have opened their lives up to him. After hearing their story, Brock tells them he has just the thing they're looking for and pulls out a pair of pink Pumas or cherry-red Docs. And he seems to get it right every time.

"As a church planter, I spent 90% of my time with Christians," he moans. "Now as a shoe salesman, I spend 90% of my time with non-Christians." He has developed significant relationships with gay couples, Marxist professors, aging hippies and bohemian artists. Just the kind of people you don't find in church. He hasn't led anyone to Jesus yet, but as an evangelist that is his heart's desire. It's a tough town to evangelise and Brock has struck on a natural way to incarnate the message of the gospel to a people group normally hostile to Christianity.

This is missional church thinking. Instead of planting a traditional, attractional church, Brock engages in the rhythms and life of a host culture to genuinely listen to their hopes and fears.

A similar experiment, but one that is much further advanced than the Subterranean is the Hope Community in Wolverhampton. Three Catholic sisters were conducting a community survey in Heath Town, an impoverished housing estate comprising nine tower-blocks. Like Brock, they simply began by listening to the voices of the community. What they heard was a litany of despair, pain and great social need. Unable to continue the "survey" ►



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► and then return to their comfortable chapter house, they rented a maisonette on the third floor of one of the towers. There, they continued their regular life of community and prayer, making themselves much more available to the local people. Missional thinking assumes that proximity to a host community is essential.

Interestingly, as Sister Margaret Walsh reports it, none of the sisters set out to initiate anything. They simply lived with and listened to their neighbours. But their gracious presence catalysed many social changes. Housing estate church services have begun, planned and led by local people. Computer courses, literacy training and holiday events have started and have contributed greatly to an improved quality of life for the estate. Their integrity of community and the power of their sense of mission have had the effect of salt and light on the estate community. While the sisters resist calling what they're doing "church", the rest of the community clearly identify the nuns' apartment as their chapel.

One of the interesting trends that seems to be developing in the emerging underground missional church is the connection between proximity spaces, shared projects, commercial enterprise and indigenous faith communities.

By proximity spaces, I mean places or events where Christians and non-Christians – not-yet-Christians – can interact meaningfully with each other. Around the world Christians are developing cafés, nightclubs, art galleries, design studios, football teams, etc. to facilitate such proximity and interaction. If the church service is the only space where we can meaningfully interact with unbelievers we're in trouble.

In Birmingham Pip Piper, the founder of a design studio called One Small Barking Dog, runs a monthly gathering in a local café, the Medicine Bar. He has negotiated permission from the publican to deck the premises out as a "spiritual space". Using incense, projected images and ambient religious music, he designs a spiritual zone he calls Maji, and artists who would normally patronise the Medicine Bar as well as invited friends can hang out, experience the ambience and talk about faith, religion, spirituality. It's a classic proximity space.

Secondly, missional church thinking values the development of shared projects between the Christian community and their host community. Proximity spaces are excellent for casual interaction. Shared projects allow the Christians to partner with unbelievers in useful, intrinsically valuable activities within the community. In the context of that partnership, significant connections

can be established. The church can initiate these shared projects; though presented as a community-wide activity, or the Christian community can simply get behind existing projects. The important thing is to find joint projects that put Christians and non-Christians shoulder to shoulder in a lengthy partnership. Time is an issue here. Whether it be public art, cleaning up the neighbourhood or running a soup kitchen, we need to find opportunities for Christians and non-Christians to meet over commonly held values. The missional church doesn't immediately think in terms of strategies, but in terms of people and places.

Thirdly, commercial enterprise is important. As Brock Bingaman says, no one in San Francisco wants another church, but they do want a cool shoe room. If we come to plant a church in a particular area we're not perceived as doing anyone any favours. But if we're starting a café, an Internet launderette or a day-care centre, we're seen as bringing some intrinsic value to a community. We're serving those to whom we're sent.

In Sheffield a woman named Jane Grinnoneau has established a community-based business called the Furnival in a derelict English pub of the same name. Her story is one of sheer hard work and graft as well as the miraculous provision of God (a great combination). The Furnival pub had been stripped, vandalised and abandoned by the time Jane came across it while wandering lost in the notorious Burngreave housing estate one day. Miraculously, she acquired the building and fully fitted it out to meet the needs of the local community. Now the Furnival is a skills centre for local young people, with a training kitchen and café. There are plans for a launderette and a multi-agency health and advice centre. Even at a denominational level, people are beginning to see the incarnational value of planting service industries within a host community.

Fourthly, indigenous faith communities ought to emerge from all this interaction with a host sub-culture. Pomona in Los Angeles is noted as a centre for bohemians, punks, hip-hoppers and performance artists. But right in the middle of it all is the Millennia Co-op. The brainchild of Brian Ollman, Millennia is a mission experiment that combines proximity spaces, shared projects, business enterprises and indigenous faith communities. The Millennia Co-op consists of several inter-connected projects, all centred in the Pomona Arts Colony. Each Millennia Co-op project provides opportunities for creative expression, employment and connecting in a healing community centred around Jesus.

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- **Art Lounge.** The Lounge is the Millennia Co-op's storefront project (literally). A street level store right on 2nd Street has been converted into a performance space/dance venue that hosts a weekly poetry night, live bands, hip-hop music and house music events. All these regular events are free or low cost and provide an alcohol and drug-free space for a diverse group of young people to hang out and create community. The Millennia Lounge also hosts occasional art exhibitions as local artists, including the homeless, can gain exposure to their work and expression. (Note: proximity space, with an element of shared project)
 - **Millennia Art Studio.** The studio has been established in the rear of the basement and is accessible by a side door from an alley. Here, beginning and experienced artists create together in a community environment. Free studio space is available, as are art workshops and vocational training courses. The artists who use the studio (Christians and non-Christians) occasionally take their work to the streets by producing murals and art installations to beautify the city. It's from the Studio that much of the work for the exhibitions in the Lounge comes. (Note: shared project and proximity space)
 - **Millennia Design Group.** Established in an open-plan office in a loft above the Lounge, the lab specialises in creative graphic designs that attract customers from an assortment of businesses in Pomona and beyond. It produces business cards, web sites, letterheads and other business collateral. (Note: business enterprise)
 - **Inner world.** Millennia's electronic dance culture collective hosts a weekly house music event in the Lounge and also makes a positive impact on the host community through projects like picking up litter and serving the homeless. (Note: shared project)
 - **Millennia Jiu-Jitsu.** In the front of the basement under the Lounge, there are weekly jiu-jitsu wrestling classes that promote community relationships and personal fitness. (Note: business enterprise and proximity space)
 - **Ichthus.** At the core of the Millennia Co-op is an indigenous faith community called Ichthus. Originally one small group, meeting in Brian Ollman's home, it has grown now to three cell churches and continues to burgeon. Members of the church are responsible for several of the Millennia projects and the leadership network (not elected, merely recognised) meets regularly to consider the future direction of the mission. Members of Ichthus see their involvement as that of a missionary. The people who have come to Ichthus and then made a

commitment to Christ were first accessed through the Lounge or jiu-jitsu or the Studio. In fact, some of those who've come to Christ have been about as far from the Church as Western kids can be. When you consider the degree of difficulty associated with trying to reach their particular community, what is happening in Pomona might rightly be considered a mini revival. ■