

1-1-2015

## Driven By Mission: Global City Mission Initiative

Jared Looney  
jaredlooney@globalcitymission.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>

---

### Recommended Citation

Looney, Jared (2015) "Driven By Mission: Global City Mission Initiative," *Leaven*: Vol. 23: Iss. 2, Article 15.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol23/iss2/15>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized administrator of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [paul.stenis@pepperdine.edu](mailto:paul.stenis@pepperdine.edu).

# Driven By Mission: Global City Mission Initiative

Jared Looney

---

When Doug Foster contacted me about participating in the national meeting of the Stone-Campbell Dialogue at Abilene Christian University in October of 2014, I was intrigued. My family history includes participation in two-thirds of the dialog representatives involved in the meeting; I grew up both in Independent Christian Churches and in Churches of Christ. In addition, today I'm the director of a new missions organization that, thus far, is made up of co-workers whose backgrounds represent nearly half from Churches of Christ and half from Independent Christian Churches. Furthermore, in the spirit of being "Christians only," we are quite open to adding team members from other Christian backgrounds as well. In addition to living in the intersection of these shared-yet-separate Christian traditions, the theme for the 2014 Stone-Campbell Dialog was focused on discussing the contemporary phenomenon of *New Church Expressions* and, as a leader in the Global City Mission Initiative (a ministry focused on disciple-making through simple forms of Christian community in urban areas), I apparently fit the bill for that too.

I'm told that my first church was an Independent Christian Church in Hilliard, Ohio. I have no memory of my time there, but others might recall rocking me to sleep or changing my diaper. Just before elementary school, we moved to the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas and participated as members in a new church plant. We lived close to my paternal grandparents, Clinton and Melba Looney, who had relocated from Guadalajara, Mexico, to the border region of Texas to continue their work of church planting and leadership development with the Independent Christian Church across the border. The new start-up church where my family worshipped eventually lost its momentum, and my father began preaching on Sunday mornings for a small elderly Christian Church until the aging membership decided they had finally reached the moment to "close the doors" for the last time.

Solidly in the Stone-Campbell tradition, my parents considered their choices. There was the Church of Christ or the First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) sitting five minutes from one another and a ten-minute drive either direction from our home. A family friend, who shared our background in the Independent Christian Church, recommended that we give the Church of Christ a try. We were reluctant at first, fearing that we might end up battling religious legalism. Over time we found a home in the congregation, and I was eventually baptized there. My parents also chose to slowly and cautiously integrate into that same Church of Christ, where we have thrived ever since.

However, we never left anything behind. We did not leave the Independent Christian Church even though we did become members of the Church of Christ. Our strong ties to our heritage in the Christian Church never wavered as we added the legacy of the Churches of Christ onto our family's faith journey. After experiencing my teenage years in our Church of Christ, I went on to attend Abilene Christian University. Perhaps ironically, while attending college in the overwhelmingly rural setting of West Texas, I found myself drawn deeper and deeper into the world of urban missions. Graduating from college, I joined the staff of a Church of Christ focused on serving the poorest communities in central Houston and at the same time attended a local seminary. While my ACU education proved to effectively equip me for theological studies, my participation in an urban seminary sponsored by the Evangelical Friends offered me an experience that no college of the

Restoration Movement could provide at the time. In several of my classes I was the only white male, and I was the only member of a Church of Christ or Independent Christian Church in all but one of my classes. As the youngest student in the seminary, I enjoyed the cross-cultural, intergenerational, and interdenominational dialog that took place around the table. I benefited greatly from looking at the biblical text and at Christian ministry from multiple angles. Still, I didn't feel the pull to leave behind my own church history, and I continued to identify with the Stone-Campbell traditions that I had inherited while simultaneously identifying broadly with the body of Christ surrounding me. As a result, I did become more conversant in the wider Christian arena and more deeply appreciative of my Restoration heritage to live out the call to be "Christians only."

In June 2001, I moved to New York City as an urban missionary. The team I joined had made a conscious decision to build our strategy based on a missiological commitments to plant churches connected with the local culture and on a theological commitment to the mission of God. As a result, we pledged ourselves to avoiding the inherent pressure of transplanting an island of the religious culture of Texas into the middle of the Bronx. Rather we were driven by missions principles of discovering pathways for engaging our unique cultural context with the gospel of Christ, and we felt a strong allegiance to the original Restoration plea to be "Christians only" in our new city. Building a life in the Bronx—which was ranked the poorest urban county in the nation and one of the top five most ethnically diverse counties in the United States—we wrestled with some of the most common missionary questions: What does it take to carry out the mission of God in this place? What should Christian community look like in this array of cultures? How do we reach people to make disciples? What forms of ministry will be most reproducible by new believers? How do we develop leaders? We wrestled with the questions that missionaries ask, struggled with our best estimation of the answers, and continued to apply what we were learning to our particular ministry context.

In the earliest months of planting a new church it became obvious why so many church plants in urban settings never make it beyond the first couple of years. We were seeing people baptized, and we were actually managing to get a new church going. Nevertheless, our missionary questions were persistently present. Before such emphases were widely fashionable, our self-declared goals as missionaries were to make disciples, to form churches through hospitality, and to see these activities multiply indigenously beyond our influence. Our desired goal was to initiate self-replicating, self-governing communities of new believers, but the maintenance required to establish even a single congregation—as we had understood congregational life—was substantial. We had planted a church, but the questions lingered.

I began to ask myself what it would take in this diverse and economically-challenged urban setting to develop even just a handful of leaders who could teach an assembly, lead worship, manage the organizational system of a congregation of one hundred or more people, continue evangelistic momentum, delegate ministries such as children or hospital visits, deal with facility issues, coordinate weekly setup and takedown, and...maintain their own Christian character and integrity along the way. I know it has been done before but, for my missionary brain, these activities are only one way to get to the goal of advancing the mission of God. Furthermore, I was beginning to realize that the expected structures of an established congregation as we had understood it was positioned to undermine our conscious goals of multiplying disciples and forming Christian communities because the management and maintenance of a located church in our urban setting was beginning to overwhelm our evangelistic objectives. Even as a church was beginning to grow, the same questions continued to challenge my assumptions.

I began to ask, "What would it take to develop leaders who could serve their neighbors unencumbered by the pressures of maintaining an institution?" "What if leaders were only expected to lead five, ten, or twenty and could do so in a home or city cafe?" After the first year of our new church, we transitioned our ministry into a pair of house churches, and within a year we were seeing local Bronxites facilitating a new church in their home.

Soon after, I began to wrestle with the possibility of developing people right where they lived, desiring for them to become ambassadors of Christ while embedded in their own community. As we gathered a new group of interested people from their existing network of friends and family, church growth could occur somewhat naturally through their existing relationships. We would develop them as Christ followers where they already were, rather than extract them out of their community to maintain a larger structure. We began to see the gospel

impact pockets of people who had been previously out of reach of the church, and perhaps most profoundly, these experiences gave me a new set of lenses for reading the book of Acts in my Bible. It was thrilling to sit sharing communion around a dining room table singing softly together while a woman shed tears of healing and repentance. It was amazing to ask a brand-new believer to gather her friends and neighbors to hear the gospel in her home and arrive to find people from a spectrum of backgrounds including Mexican, Ecuadorian, Jamaican, and Punjabi all assembled in her apartment. It was exciting to witness a new leader, who had grown up in the projects of East Harlem, beginning to reach into his own network of friends and family and bring them to the foot of the cross. The list of these early stories of redemption and transformation became longer as we kept refining our ministry practices, and my own questions continued as we encountered new obstacles.

Focusing on making a local impact and attempting to build stability into local house churches brought up new challenges. Individuals and families were constantly moving—both out of the city and across town. Mobility is constant in a globalized world, and I began to realize the need for ministry strategies that are more fluid and for discipleship systems that can be reproduced quickly. Lengthy linear approaches would be increasingly unreliable if many of the people we encounter are subject to make a change in location, work hours, or other significant area of life. We began to incorporate approaches to Bible study that were inductive and quickly reproducible, but the most significant shift was in my own outlook. Evangelism became the work of finding receptive people who will gather their friends and family so that the gospel will take hold among them in their own community. This would be the genesis of church. I realized that the same challenge for stabilizing a new congregation was also an incredible opportunity for spreading and multiplying the witness of the gospel far beyond our immediate reach.

To confess, if I am honest, it is personally more comforting to point to a clearly defined religious body in an established location and gladly meet the expectations of friends, colleagues, and supporters from across our tradition, but the missionary questions would remain. How do we multiply evangelistic witness and experience church in such an interconnected urban world? How does ministry become adaptable to meet the mobility and diversity of our global society? How can globalization become an opportunity for mission rather than undermine it? It is virtually impossible for our current church-planting methods in North America to even come close to keeping pace with the current population growth. Pioneering new strategies that address our new global context are urgently needed. No, I don't in any way think that means an end to conventional congregational life. Not even close. However, I do believe that—in addition to Christian congregations as we've known them—there must be missions strategies for developing fluid, self-replicating, and evangelistic expressions of church that help to advance the gospel in an increasingly complex, mobile, and globalized world. We are in pursuit of that vision.

After a decade in New York City, one of our most trusted partners suggested we begin a new missions organization—Global City Mission Initiative—and volunteered to gather a board of directors. As the ministry has begun to develop and grow over the last few years, it has centered around some basic truths about the new context for global missions. First, the world is now a network of cities. Current projections forecast that by 2050, seventy percent of our planet's population will live in metropolitan areas. Pioneering urban-evangelism and church-planting strategies is crucial to the future of Christian missions, and we're excited to be one of many ministries participating in building strategies for our present-future. Secondly, the world is a much smaller place than it once was. Globalization is changing the context of global missions; therefore, our mission strategies must reflect these new realities. We are now living in an increasingly mobile, interconnected world, and our evangelism and church-planting strategies will be challenged to be increasingly fluid and adaptive to these emerging realities. Adaptability is the key ministry skill of the twenty-first century. We stand at the threshold of amazing opportunities to engage as missionaries in a globalized society. (I've written elsewhere discussing these implications for missions in far more detail.) Most importantly, we are challenged by Jesus's message to continue his work of making disciples who are growing in faith and obedience in the Lord Jesus. The aim of Global City Mission Initiative is “making disciples at the world's crossroads.”

It's difficult to summarize the development of Global City Mission Initiative (GCMI) as well as my own story in Restoration traditions in a single article, and it's even more challenging to attempt to do so without

finding the space to include the important nuances and a more in-depth description of the ins-and-outs of particular milestones in this story. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that this is an exciting time to participate in God's mission in our world.

Global cities provide an international crossroads for encountering some of the world's least-reached ethnic groups and are bridges to some of the hardest-to-reach places on our planet. More often than not, least-reached peoples originating from Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, or Jewish communities now living in Western cities are not going to stroll into the nearest church building because of a slick postcard or the name over the door. If anything, they are suspicious of our Western religious structures and often are under some pressure from their family or others from within their community to keep their distance. However, when a GCMI missionary hosts a group of friends and neighbors for Thanksgiving, we can find a Moroccan man sitting at the table building friendship with others while a Chinese woman pulls the Bible from a shelf and begins reading God's story for the first time. Weeks later, a new Bible study group starts with the Chinese woman and her friends, and the Moroccan man confesses privately that he is seeking the truth about God because he no longer believes Islam is the way. Such stories of evangelism among unreached people repeat over and over again, and discovering inroads for the gospel is often not going to be through traditional Western structures of church.

By applying reproducible methods of evangelism and initiating small, self-replicating expressions of Christian community, we can begin to envision the gospel moving along global pathways created by international mobility. As another GCMI missionary facilitates an inductive Bible study with a group of Chinese students in Manhattan, one of the young women explains that she is regularly sharing the Bible stories that she is learning with her boyfriend back in China. Her boyfriend encourages her to keep learning these stories and sharing them with him whenever they talk. In a global world, self-replicating evangelism practices leap across continents with the push of a button.

In addition, many Americans have already made up their minds about church. For many, they are not going to start searching for the nearest Christian congregation on Google, nor do they hold any denominational loyalties. They are members of what is increasingly becoming a post-Christendom society. However, when a GCMI missionary begins building relationships at a local pub, individuals that have no interest in getting up early on a Sunday morning are now interested in learning more about Jesus on Saturday night. On more than one occasion, I've sat with men who are opening a Bible for the first time in their lives. They may have grown up in the United States or in a predominantly Christian Caribbean nation, but they are moving through the gospel narrative for the very first time with anticipation—wondering how the story is going to end. Working among the unchurched in urban America has been a common occurrence in my experience. Fortunately, initiating forms of church that take place in spaces where people are already living their lives bridges a gap for individuals who aren't actively seeking a church.

I suppose our team may be categorized among those ministries pursuing “new church expressions.” In reality, we are standing on the shoulders of those who have given birth to our faith through their testimony, mentoring, and zeal. I like to think we are simply joining the historic body of Christ in discovering how God is moving in our moment in history. Throughout the journey, I've continued to identify with my Restoration traditions as well as with the wider body of Christ. While discovering new pathways for the gospel, I haven't left anything or ejected myself from my own Christian heritage. Rather, Christian Churches and Churches of Christ have birthed in me a desire to simply know Jesus as Lord, and while participating in the forging of new missionary pathways, I have cherished the Restoration rallying cry to be “Christians only.”

**JARED LOONEY** IS THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF GLOBAL CITY MISSION INITIATIVE ([WWW.GLOBALCITYMISSION.ORG](http://WWW.GLOBALCITYMISSION.ORG)) IN NEW YORK CITY ([JAREDLLOONEY@GLOBALCITYMISSION.COM](mailto:JAREDLLOONEY@GLOBALCITYMISSION.COM)).

