

Inner City Tempe Missions

**A Paper
Submitted to Dr. Malcolm Hartnell
Phoenix Seminary
Scottsdale, Arizona**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
MI 504**

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27-Apr-2008**

Missions to inner cities are often not looked on the same way as mission outreaches to foreign lands, but much can be learned from the insights gleaned from, and methods used for, missions abroad. Many would consider outreach in one's own area an 'E1' mission; however, inner cities tend to have a very tight culture all their own and should better be seen as an 'E2' mission ground. Downtown Tempe has a very distinct culture and people group with a common self-identity share by its members. The proximity to Arizona State University feeds one subculture of *student* population. The staff that work the businesses lining downtown-- mostly pubs, coffee shops, and restaurants-- form a very tight *server* community, as well. Finally, there is a gathering of *homeless youth* that compose a third major subculture in Downtown Tempe. We will describe the unique aspects of the culture, attempting with each aspect to list methods which have worked in reaching this people group. Finally, we will look at strategic specifics of the area, immediately useful to anyone seeking to reach out to this community.

Relationships are hugely important to the different subcultures of Downtown Tempe, but for disparate reasons. Many of the students are in a new location and absent from lifelong relationships. They are starving for a missing component of their life. The servers have so much in common with each other. They have a unique job niche with many caveats and secrets they share. They face many of the same struggles and have a built in support group at the staff in the pub next door. The homeless youth need relationships to survive. Their gang

mentality shuns outsiders and their need for shelter is better satisfied as a group. Relationship bonding with the student group can take place quickly, as they are seeking to fill lost relationship holes. Bonding with the servers is often a difficult task. They can respect you and you will quickly become well known in their circles if you earn the reputation of a “good customer” (or a “bad customer”). Treating them as a friend instead of a servant and tipping 30%+ and always tipping at least \$3/hr, regardless of your order, when occupying one of their tables while studying can both go a long way to building reputation among the servers as a “good customer”. This status can lead to many ministry opportunities, but the missionary will not be considered an insider until establishing a relationship which includes activities outside of their workplace with one of the members of the community. Once this key relationship is established, the server community will welcome you into their circles inside and outside of their workplace and new relationships develop quickly. The homeless youth have such a transformed identity to their subculture that becoming an insider requires quite a sacrifice. This group has such a need, however, that being an insider isn't required to gain meaningful opportunities to share the Gospel. This last subculture is actually identified by what Christ can heal. The unique goal for the missionary can be to bring salvation for both a spiritual and physical home, and remove them from this subculture. The need to have relationships is a holy function created in us by God. Contextualizing the form of these relationships into good healthy roles can be vital in ministry to this culture. Clearly defined healthy relationship roles have degenerated as noticed in the follow observation.

Alternative lifestyle, high sexual activity, chemical abuse, and addiction is prevalent in this culture. For the students, sex is an easy substitute for missing relationships, and a quick release from the stresses of school. Most servers excessively drink and use tobacco. The latter is the only acceptable regular break for their industry, as they do not have scheduled downtimes. One cause for the former is that kitchens usually close by 11 and a majority of the server staff is cut for the night at this time, while the bartenders and a light staff remain until 2am. This first group, let go for the evening and wanting to wind down from a busy shift, have little choice for a place to go. They usually end up at neighboring establishments consoling the remaining staff and drinking excessively until close. The cosmological battle between God and foes for His lost creation is very visible everywhere. The wanton chemical and sexual excess has led to a community calloused to the joy of healthy relationships, with blurred lines of activity between “friends”, “dating partners”, and “committed romantic” relationships. Hardly even a distinction is made between hetero-, homo-, and bi-sexual classes, and moral convictions are shunned when speaking about these classes. The spiritual blindness is obvious when examining statements by one individual who claims the one single place on earth she does not feel comfortable and nearly refuses to go is a Christian church. Any other faith or organization is good or at least neutrally interesting. Dedication to prayer, asking for God to transform souls and heal blindness to the harm they are causing themselves is an essential component to ministry in Downtown Tempe.

Women play such a vital role in the ministry to Downtown culture. Building loving relationships with individuals of the community is foundational to any missionary outreach. In Downtown Tempe culture, flirting, even among friends, dominates interactions between male and female. A relationship can quickly develop between a missionary male and a community female, which can easily lead to a dating relationship if other missionary females are not included in the social meetings.

A dominant theme in the culture is to not be under anyone's authority. This is seen in all 3 subcultures, but predominantly in the homeless youth. Most of the youth have left or been kick out of home for rebellion against their family. Urging this community to willingly bow to a benevolent king is a challenging task. Making them understand that they will bow eventually, and that a willing choice now can give them a healthy, peaceful life here, and eternity after, is a very counter-cultural concept.

There are already a number modalities and sodalities-- local churches and outreach organizations, respectively-- who have found their identity in God's Great Commission to reach this specific people group. Like the Moravians, evangelism and personal conversion, instead of church planting, should be the Tempe Downtown missionary's goal. In personal evangelism to this debauched culture, the challenge is to refrain from the initial desire to *moralize* them with 'the law' of contemporary Christianity, and to instead bring them to the freedom in the love of their Creator Who has called them into a transforming relationship

with Him.

Seminaries can have a great impact in this community. Uniquely equipped to understand, from their own culture, the culture of the Scriptures, they can powerfully convey the truths of the Gospel if a personal understanding of the Downtown culture is gleaned. As students, themselves, seminarians struggle with many of the same issues in common with the downtown Tempe Arizona State University student subculture. Tempe pubs and coffee shops cater to this student subculture, so seminarians will find these places an accommodating place to study and work on their education, as well. As their unique field of study stands out among the other students, the server subculture will curiously be drawn to converse with the seminarians. As friendships are formed and the missionary is immerses into the Downtown surroundings, special care must be taken to make healthy accommodation and adaptation to the indigenous culture. The high level of sinfulness that permeates, even identifies, this culture makes "fitting in" a thoughtful challenge, but it can be done. For example, at late night drink gatherings, there are two choices for transportation home afterward. Either an expensive cab fare will be paid, or one person in the party will sacrificially remain sober to drive the others home. This later role provides a key accepted identity, strategic for fitting into the culture. A seminary student can also find a tent-making ministry working as a Downtown server to be both an accommodating provisional profession during school, while also giving them entrance into the society.

Some strategic specifics of the current landscape of Downtown Tempe culture can give fast-track access into this community. Rula Bula Irish Pub and My Big Fat Greek Restaurant are two establishments with very tight server communities. Rula is a great place to eat, relax, and take in culture. Tuesday nights are open mic night hosted by Mill Ave. talent Walt Richardson. Each Tuesday much of the same crowd comes out and signs up to play or sing 3 songs of their choice. Some acts are great, some pretty bad, but the community is consistent and easy to bond with-- especially if the minister has a musical gift willing to demonstrate, but this is not necessary. The servers at Rula have been together for a number of years and find identity and deep sense of family in their community. Wednesday nights they usually close the evening together at Prankster's Bar and Grill. My Big Fat Greek Restaurant has a server community bent toward Phoenix Sun's basketball. Sitting at the bar during a game, the minister will find him- or herself surrounded by a gathering of servers regularly filtering through to watch the TVs. Just outside is a favorite gathering place for the homeless youth, as they wait for patrons to exit and donate boxed leftovers for their dinner. The food at both establishments is great and Internet access can be had for study and research. Three coffee shops: Coffee Plantation, Starbucks, and Mill's End, are perfect places to minister to students. Each of these establishments has a distinct, loyal crowd, and studying with these groups is a great way to begin to bond. Attention should be made to develop a regular weekly pattern of frequency, as students are placed on regular schedules by their curriculum and tend to develop studying at the same location and same time each week. A key sodality in the area is Mamacita's Pub. This establishment is

owned by the worship team drummer of local outreach Praxis Church, who has a heart to run his business among his target mission people group. It is staffed mostly with Praxis Church members and is a great partnering establishment to utilize. Praxis Church proper has been a key proponent to Downtown Tempe missions. Though a modality, Praxis Church considers Downtown Tempe their neighborhood where they perform traditional church tasks in ways tailored specifically to the surrounding culture.

Downtown Tempe missions can be a key part of Phoenix Seminary outreach. God, since Abraham, has direct His people to use their blessings from Him to be a blessing to the world. As we enjoy blessings of peace and security in this life, let us never forget the uncertainty, discord, and insecurity in lives of those right around us everyday.