

## **WE AREN'T ABOUT WEEKENDS**

**An interview with Bob Roberts, Pastor, NorthWood Church, Keller, Texas**

**In kingdom work, we make a mistake when we start with ecclesiology. We should start with Christology. Our first approach should be "How can we live out the love of Jesus in this society?" It's not "How can we start a church?"**

One Sunday Pastor Bob Roberts asked everyone in the congregation at NorthWood Church in Keller, Texas, to invert the collar of the person in front of them, find the label, and call out the nation where the shirt was made. China, India, Vietnam, Mexico, Chile, Kenya, Dominican Republic, and Spain were all mentioned before someone finally said "USA."

The shirts on their backs came from all over the world. It was Bob's way of reinforcing his recurring theme of *glocalization*, synonymous with Thomas Friedman's "the earth is flat." It describes today's seamless integration between the local and global, a comprehensive connectedness produced by travel, business, and communications.

"*Glocal* is as important a term to the 21st century as *postmodern* and *seeker* were to the 20th century," says Roberts, who has written two books, [Transformation: How Glocal Churches Transform Lives and the World](#) (Zondervan, 2006) and [Glocalization: How Followers of Jesus Engage a Flat World](#) (Zondervan, 2007).

He has applied the concept in quiet but effective ways at NorthWood, a church of 2,000 in suburban Fort Worth that has helped plant some 89 other churches in the last 15 years. The focus of NorthWood and all the daughter churches is not gathering people inside the sanctuary; it's clearly missional.

"We aren't about weekends," Bob says. "We aren't just trying to get people into church. It's 'kingdom in, kingdom out.'"

This means each church emphasizes weekday ministry in local neighborhoods as well as ongoing ministry with a particular nation overseas. NorthWood, for instance, has continuing ministries in Puebla, Mexico, and sends people several times a year to both Vietnam and Afghanistan to help with orphans, education, clinics, small businesses, water purification, and more.

Over three days, including both a weekend and a weekday, *Leadership* interviewed Bob about life in a glocal church.

### **What is the mission of NorthWood Church?**

Glocal transformation.

### **You mean transformation of individuals or of communities or what?**

All of it. It starts with individuals. But it can't stop there.

Societies are built on several domains:

- The family, from which we get our values.
- The tribe, from which we get our culture.
- The city, from which we get our livelihood.
- The nation, from which we get our security and our trade.

Finally, the world. And all of that is within the realm of the kingdom of God. We use the word *glocal*, meaning the kingdom encompasses all of this, local and global.

The number one result of God's kingdom is transformation of all the sectors.

**Wow. That's some purpose ...**

No, that's our *mission*. Our *purpose* is to glorify God. I'm still Augustinian in my theology.

**Okay. So what's your church's role in this transformation?**

We're a connection center between believers and all of society's domains. Jesus told his disciples to be his witnesses, to live out and proclaim the gospel, in "Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth."

"Jerusalem" is where we live and work. We train our people to view their vocation as their "Jerusalem" ministry. From there, we teach them to use their vocation and skills to intersect a domain locally ("Judea") and to other nearby cultures—for us, Mexico is our "Samaria"—and globally to the "ends of the earth" (we define that as a hard place in the world, and for us, that's Vietnam and Afghanistan).

**When you go to Afghanistan or Vietnam, what do you hope to do there?**

To honor God and to see God's kingdom engaging society. Our aim is to engage the society with hope, to go there and serve them with whatever they need that we can provide.

The church connects to society through the natural infrastructures, equipping and sending church people, primarily through their jobs, to affect a particular domain. For example, our people who serve in the agricultural profession have found dozens of ways to connect with societies overseas through water treatment programs, crops, and livestock. The same is true for those in the fields of health care, education, or economics—medical workers, teachers, or small business owners have a wealth of experience to share with countries that desperately need their expertise.

**You make it a point to go into nations "through the front door," meaning with the consent of their governments. When you introduce yourself to government officials there, what do you say about why you are there?**

I tell them up front, "My name is Bob Roberts and I pastor NorthWood Church. It's an honor to meet you and to get to experience your culture and your society. I believe one of the greatest challenges we face in the world today is that we're isolated from one another. I would like to see us experience face-to-face, people-to-people diplomacy. And the best way we can do that is to teach one another, to serve one another, and to get to know one another. We are Christians, and we won't pretend to be anything else, but we also will respect your laws. We're not here to convert; we're here because we've been converted by Jesus Christ. And we would like a mutual relationship where we can benefit you but where we can also learn from you."

**What kinds of things do they ask for?**

All sorts of things. If they need help with education or computer equipment or special needs children or dental care, then I don't make specific promises then, but I come back and I look in my church or other churches in the area for educators or computer people or social workers or dentists or whatever. I make lots of phone calls.

Then I connect these resource people with the people in those countries.

**So it's not one mission trip, but a series of trips working with the same people.**

It's not on the first trip that you see any results. It's on the return trips, when you've come back with help for the needs they identified, that trust and friendship are established. And that's where kingdom impact is made.

**This is a different kind of mission from church planting.**

In kingdom work, we make a mistake when we start with ecclesiology. We should start with Christology. Our first approach should be "How can we live out the love of Jesus in this society?" It's not "How can we start a church?"

People living like Jesus: that's what changes a society. Too often, we start with a preacher who tries to gather a church first, thinking that, in time they'll get around to engaging the world. That's backwards. It teaches people to think engaging the world is something we pay people to do after the church is built, or that it's an occasional trip we make.

No, we want people to understand the Great Commission is not the church's project, but it's something we all own personally. "You mean me go and use my job? What in the world can a plumber do over there?" Yes, we want everyone to think mission first. Mission doesn't mean multiplying churches, but finding ways to show God's love and greatness to the world.

If you focus on mission, churches will follow, but if you focus on churches, mission often gets lost.

**Is this true of individuals, too? Does focusing on my "standing" in Christ divert the focus from my "calling" in Christ?**

It can. Our definition of disciple must move from the celebration of a moment of "conversion" to a focus on transformation over time, seeing that person and their community transformed. We have to move from an evangelism perspective that says, "Here's the prayer you need to pray. If you don't accept my gospel presentation, it's over. I've done my duty" to a radically different expression of faith, which is unabashedly proclaiming the gospel, *and serving, and loving.*

**How does evangelism fit into your understanding of mission?**

I see evangelism as introducing a person to Jesus and getting that person to convert. Our mission is engaging the whole of society as agents of God's kingdom. For God's kingdom to be seen on earth, evangelism is a must.

But if we focus on evangelism only, then when we've done evangelism, congratulations, somebody got converted. End of story. But evangelism isn't the endgame. It's just a core competency. If we're trying to see a community transformed, evangelism is just part of it.

**Your church is helping internationally with clinics and schools in Afghanistan and Vietnam. You're working locally by tutoring in under-resourced schools and in correctional facilities. Your church specifically offers help to families of special needs children. Doesn't it take a large church to be missional in this way?**

No. We started when we were a church of 300; a church of any size can do this. The key is to focus on one spot. Don't bebop everywhere. Find a place to serve and stay with it long term.

When I began to read the Bible and understand how societies were put together and what God's kingdom was all about, I thought, *My goodness, everything a society needs is sitting in my pews.* We just started applying the resources we had to the societal needs we became aware of.

If you have a hundred people, you can engage two or three domains of society all by yourself. Nothing will transform your church like building a \$15,000 school in east Asia and sending four of your schoolteachers, who raise their own money, to go and help put it together. It will change the whole makeup of your church.

We've gained resources as we've grown, but mission is what Christians do in whatever size group they're in.

**Most churches that try to "find a need and fill it" fall exhausted just trying to meet the needs within the congregation. "We need more youth workers. We need more**

**children's workers. We need more small group leaders." The "needs" within a congregation are never satisfied, and that can draw a church's focus inward. How do you break out of that to focus on touching the world outside?**

You have to ask yourself, *What kind of a church do we want to be? What is my definition of church? And what kind of disciples am I producing?*

If my church is primarily about the Sunday event, then doing kingdom work is secondary and actually unnecessary. If the Sunday event and church programming is primary, then I'll spend all my time, money, and energy what happens inside the church.

For so many pastors, church is about what happens on Sunday. Well, I really disagree with that. Church is not supposed to be a Sunday event. It's supposed to be salt and light in the family, in the community, and around the world.

Our church is not about the weekend. I didn't understand this when we started. Many churches, like ours, start out with mass mailers, advertising, "show up on Sunday," we're starting "our thing."

But the best people to reach are those you connect with in your community involvement when you're engaging the culture. They're seeing the church in action, not just in its advertising.

**Doesn't every church believe in missions?**

Lots of churches tack it on here and there. But it's an add-on. Missions isn't the core of what they do.

That's why I don't use the word *missions*. We talk about the kingdom. At our church we say, "Kingdom in, kingdom out." When the kingdom gets inside of you, then missions is not an occasional project you do; you live out your faith constantly for God's kingdom.

**You also ask, "What kind of disciples are we producing?"**

That's huge. For years pastors have implied, "Come to church; come to small group; you'll be a disciple." It hasn't worked. That system's broke. We all know that. Even if we get people into small groups, how many groups are really turning people into disciples that engage the world for God's kingdom?

Discipleship is more than urging conversions, signing people up for Bible study, and recruiting workers for church programs. The greatest tool for making disciples is getting people to engage the world.

**What did this change of focus mean for you as a preacher?**

Humility. Not trying to get people to come back to hear me. But to get them into the world. Think about it. Why do people come to hear most preachers? Because they're great preachers. But some kinds of great preaching just anesthetize the church. People will tell their friends, "Oh, you've got to hear this." But that's the extent of their action. Listening to that kind of preaching leads only to more listening.

Part of the problem is the preacher's natural interpretation of certain passages. We preachers naturally tend to organize the church around our role. Take Ephesians 4. We'll preach about the leadership roles: apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher. But we concentrate on the roles of leading the church—we're focused on *our* gifts. We've neglected everyone else.

What are all those leadership functions for? "For works of service." We are to preach in such a way that leaders are in the background and we make the heroes the people doing the works of service.

## **Are "missional" churches the answer?**

Some "missional" churches use that term but basically are all about relevant communication.

It's still church as an event versus church as a force engaging the world. They'll say, "We're all about living incarnationally," which means having real conversations with people that are similar in a postmodern, secular society. That's relevance. It's not bad; it's good.

But it's not taking the kingdom of God across cultural boundaries and taking people beyond where they are already. Or going to people who are nearby but who are two or three steps removed from your thinking and your life.

## **What direction do you see things going in the future?**

The things I'm learning most about faith today are from Christians in the East. That's who I'm learning from.

As I look at history, every major shift took place when the center of geography of Christianity shifted. We saw that in transitions from Jerusalem to Antioch to Constantinople to Rome to Wittenburg to England to the U.S.

It's time now for another major shift, maybe to Seoul or Nairobi. When that happens, there may be a schism in the church; history proves that. But here's what's going to be cool. We're going to get a whole new set of Calvins and Luthers. They're probably going to be Phuc or Nghi or Akmed. Can you imagine what we're going to learn about God from an Asian Reformer's perspective, or African, or Arab?

We're past due for some brilliant new ways of seeing God, and they're going to bring that to us. That really excites me.

*Bob Roberts on church and mission:*

## **9 Things I'm Learning and Unlearning**

**I'm learning** ... that mission begins with Christology not ecclesiology. Following Jesus leads us to mission, which leads to churches gathering.

**I'm unlearning** ... my assumption that starting churches naturally leads to mission. It doesn't. Churches default to self-focus unless a commitment to be like Jesus in the world comes first.

**I'm learning** ... that being glocal means decentralizing power, decision making, information, all of it. The kingdom of God means ministry opportunities are available to almost everyone.

**I'm unlearning** ... the American church's traditional focus on a super-star speaker, worship leader, educator, and shepherd, which serves mainly to attract spectators rather than igniting the power of everyone else.

**I'm learning** ... that we serve not to convert but because we have been converted. We serve because Christ has changed us and made us servants to people who are hurting and lost.

**I'm unlearning** ... the assumption that "Christian" is defined primarily as acknowledging a moment of conversion. Becoming a follower of Jesus depends on what happens after that.

**I'm learning** ... to love people, which means to see them healed, educated, and given the same opportunities that we have

**I'm unlearning** ... that the Christian faith is all about heaven. I believe the church has denied the future by just waiting for the Second Coming. We need a story that includes the future.

**I'm learning** ... the kingdom will be established not by human power or entertainment, but by realizing God's concern for humanity and the whole of society.

Posted on January 31, 2007



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