

Kingdom Witness in the City



Summary: In recent years, there have been many formal and informal conversations about Acklen's role in the community of Nashville. From its origins as a neighborhood church in the 1930s to the bus ministry of the 1970s to the recent years of Room in the Inn involvement, Acklen has sought to bless the community. Over and over though, I have heard, "Room in the Inn is great, but we can do more." At the same time, I hear, "We have so many kids, and we are so busy. How can we do more? Even if we could do more, what would we do?"

These questions lead to the following series *Kingdom Witness in the City*. Together, we will assess our current situation in the city as well as God's will for the city. Admittedly, our situation is unique and complicated by our lack of members living in the neighborhood around the building as well as our high ratio of small children. Together, we will discuss the nature and mission of the church, as well as the biblical mandate to serve others and share our faith through words and deeds. Finally, I will propose a new strategy for our small groups, the forming of a partnership with a local community ministry or non-profit. A partnership is defined as a continual commitment as opposed to an episodic relationship. It could range from a weekly to quarterly commitment. I believe serving through our groups makes sense organizationally and theologically, as we have already experienced through the Room in the Inn rotation. Finally, as we do with Room in the Inn, all members will be invited to serve, not just those in groups.

The format of this series will be as follows. These writings will be the basis of our Sunday Morning Class discussion. Small groups will then use the provided discussion questions and exercises to engage the material. Finally, on Wednesday nights, we will host guest speakers from community ministries and non-profits as we seek to learn more about what God is doing in the city.

Outline:

1. Acklen, Nashville, and “Neighborhood”
2. Theology of the City
3. Church as a Community of Kingdom Exiles
4. The Mission of the Church is to Witness to the Kingdom
5. Witnessing through Service
6. Witnessing through Evangelism
7. Witnessing through Small Groups
8. Strategy: Partnering with Community Ministries and Non profits
9. Discerning a Partnership
10. The future of Acklen and Nashville

Two Key Scriptures

God's word to the exiles in Babylon, spoken through Jeremiah

Jeremiah 29:5 "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. 7 Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the **city** to which I have carried you into **exile**. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." 8 Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. 9 They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the Lord. 10 This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. 11 For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

The Resurrected Jesus' words to the 11 prior to His Ascension

Acts 1:6 Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the **kingdom** to Israel?" 7 He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my **witnesses** in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

#1 ACKLEN, NASHVILLE, AND “NEIGHBORHOOD”

Let us consider the history of the Acklen Avenue Church of Christ as well as our current demographics. Then we will look the history of Nashville, in particular the neighborhoods immediately the to the south-Edgehill and 12 South. Finally, we will consider how to define our “neighborhood.”

The Acklen Avenue Church of Christ began in January of 1934. The following is an excerpt from the Gospel Advocate on December 7, 1939.

In January, 1934, in a small storehouse at 810 Acklen Avenue, a number of brethren and sisters met for worship. This location was used as a meeting place until October, 1934, at which time a dwelling on the corner of Acklen and Beech avenues was purchased from R.O. Elliott. It was remodeled inside so as to have an adequate auditorium, classrooms for Bible study, and also equipped with comfortable individual seats and baptistery. The property is now almost free of debt. No outside contributions have been solicited or received to defray any expense, all obligations having been taken care of by regular weekly contributions. The present membership is more than triple the original number; and as the house is now not large enough for present needs, definite plans are under way for the construction in the very near future of a larger building. The congregation has never had a regular preacher, and has never offered any attraction save the gospel in its simplicity.

In 1955, the current building opened on 900 Acklen Avenue. The numerical highpoint was round 1959 with an average attendance of around 250 between two worship services. Most everyone walked to church. In the 1960s, people slowly began to move out. By 1972, the average attendance was down to 125. By this time, most members came to worship in cars. In 1973, the bus ministry began, which was a bright spot for the congregation in terms of outreach. By the end of the 1970s, it had become difficult to compete with suburban church programs as well as connect with a changing neighborhood where few members lived.

In 1981, Paul came to preach at Acklen. In Paul’s “Chronicle of the Acklen Avenue Church of Christ” written in 1985, he says: *During this time period, Acklen has moved its sense of mission to providing a learning experience and mission support for college students.* As we can attest, this methodology brought the fruit of the current membership. Average attendance bottomed out at around 40-50 in the mid 1990s before much of the current membership came as college students.



Another event worthy of mention is of course the Great Flood of 2010. The basement flooded, and the congregation met at Lipscomb University for almost a year. Many credit this experience with being a force of galvanization among Acklenites. The question of “should we rebuild” turned to “why should we rebuild” which ultimately became “why does God want us at 900 Acklen Avenue?” This time period paved the way for our involvement with Room in the Inn as well as the current conversation on community engagement.

Currently, our congregation has three main connections within a couple miles of 900 Acklen Avenue-Room in the Inn, the Lawrence Avenue congregation, and Lipscomb University.

Demographics of Acklen

Now, let us look at the demographics of Acklen. While not monolithic, a brief snapshot reveals a church mostly made up of young families living in south Nashville who graduated from Lipscomb University. In addition, there has been a numerical resurgence over the last 15 years through the baby boom and member commitment, specifically after the flood.

As of January 2013, Acklen is made up of 112 people. There are currently 37 family units. Neighborhoods with double-digit members starting with the highest are Crieve Hall, Nipper’s Corner, Green Hills, and Cane Ridge. All of these are in south Nashville. 93% of the congregation lives in Davidson County. 58% of the body is made up of adults, and the

remaining 42% are children ages 11 and younger. 59% of the adults went to Lipscomb University.

However, there are key exceptions to the demographics. There are some members who live within a mile or so from the church building. While it sometimes feels “everybody went to Lipscomb”, in reality, 41% did not. Also, many in the congregation are not young families, whether they are elderly or single.

The demographics of the small groups are interesting. Of the 37 family units of the congregation, 17 are in groups. While 57% of the congregation is in a small group, only 46% of the family units are in groups. Therefore, small groups are disproportionately made up of young families. The four small groups meet respectively in Crieve Hall, Nippers Corner, Cane Ridge, and north Williamson County.

In 2012, the average attendance was 91, or 83% of the total membership. Compared with other congregations this is an extremely high number. When put together with Sunday morning class, small group, and Room in the Inn participation, the numbers reflect that Acklenites have a high level of commitment to the congregation. Moreover, the demographics suggest we have a high level of commitment to the city of Nashville.

History of Area around 900 Acklen Avenue

Now, let us look at the history of south Nashville, specifically Edge Hill and 12 South. It is my contention that there are several similarities between the history of Acklen and it's neighborhood. There was a time in Nashville when “whites” moved out of the city into the “suburbs.” Can you guess when this happened? It radically affected the neighborhood around the Acklen building.

Of course, this dynamic has occurred more than once. Interestingly enough, the first time this happened was in the late 1800s, around the time the City Reservoir was built up the hill from Acklen in 1889. Consider the following excerpt from the *Nashville Civic Design Center Report-Edgehill Neighborhood*:

The arrival of a streetcar line to Edgehill around 1890 made the neighborhood more attractive to downtown professionals. White commuters began to settle along 8th and 9th Avenues on the eastern border of the neighborhood and along 15th Avenue to the west. Before long, the Great Migration brought a flood of rural black migrants into Nashville as they sought work in the city or stopped there on the way north. The large growth in Nashville's African American population coincided with the rise in popularity of the automobile. Many of Nashville's white residents moved to new suburban areas further from downtown, segregating the once- integrated inner city neighborhoods.

Over time, the Edgehill and 12 South neighborhoods become integrated as well. However, later in the 1950s and 1960s, many “whites” moved further out again, leaving behind a neighborhood segregated by race and class. Several factors contributed to the “flight.” The Edgehill Public Housing Project was built in 1954. Also, this was the decade of school

integration. In 1956, President Eisenhower signed the Federal Highway Act. The construction of I-65 disrupted the flow and rhythm of the neighborhood. Furthermore, it allowed residents to move further out and still get to their downtown jobs rather quickly. Most likely, property value and related speculation played a key role as well in migration patterns.

The enabler of “flight” is transportation, and “flight” always makes community thinner. Instead of thick neighborhoods where people walk to school and church, people drive to everything. As many sociologists have pointed out, transportation has decreased the social capital of neighborhoods.

In the 1990s, as the suburbs expanded further and gas prices got even higher, many “whites” decided to move back to the city. Currently, the area around Acklen is the late stages of gentrification. While few Acklenites live near the building, it is noteworthy that the growing interest in the neighborhood coincides with the growth of Acklen.

The Definition of “Neighborhood”

So what is the neighborhood of the Acklen church? Is it the area immediately around 900 Acklen Avenue? Is it Edgehill or 12 South or both? Is it South Nashville or perhaps even all of Nashville?

In Luke 10, Jesus is asked, “Who is my neighbor?” He responds by telling a story, which does not involve a neighborhood. A man is robbed and beaten out on the open road. The priest and Levi see their responsibilities as focused on the destination of Jerusalem, and do not want this interruption to hold them back. However, the Samaritan stops and helps the man, and therefore Jesus seems to be saying neighbors are anyone we come in contact with. Therefore, our “neighborhood” is the realm of our presence. In other words, our “neighborhood” is the area where we live, work, worship, and study. It is where we buy groceries, check out books, take piano lessons, and play soccer.

With this understanding, we could say that **Acklen’s neighborhood begins with the area directly around 900 Acklen Avenue but radiates out to all the places where members live and breathe during the week.** This will have significant ramifications on how we see our mission. We need to be involved in the 12 South/Edgehill neighborhoods, but we should not fixate exclusively on these areas to the detriment of where members live and work.

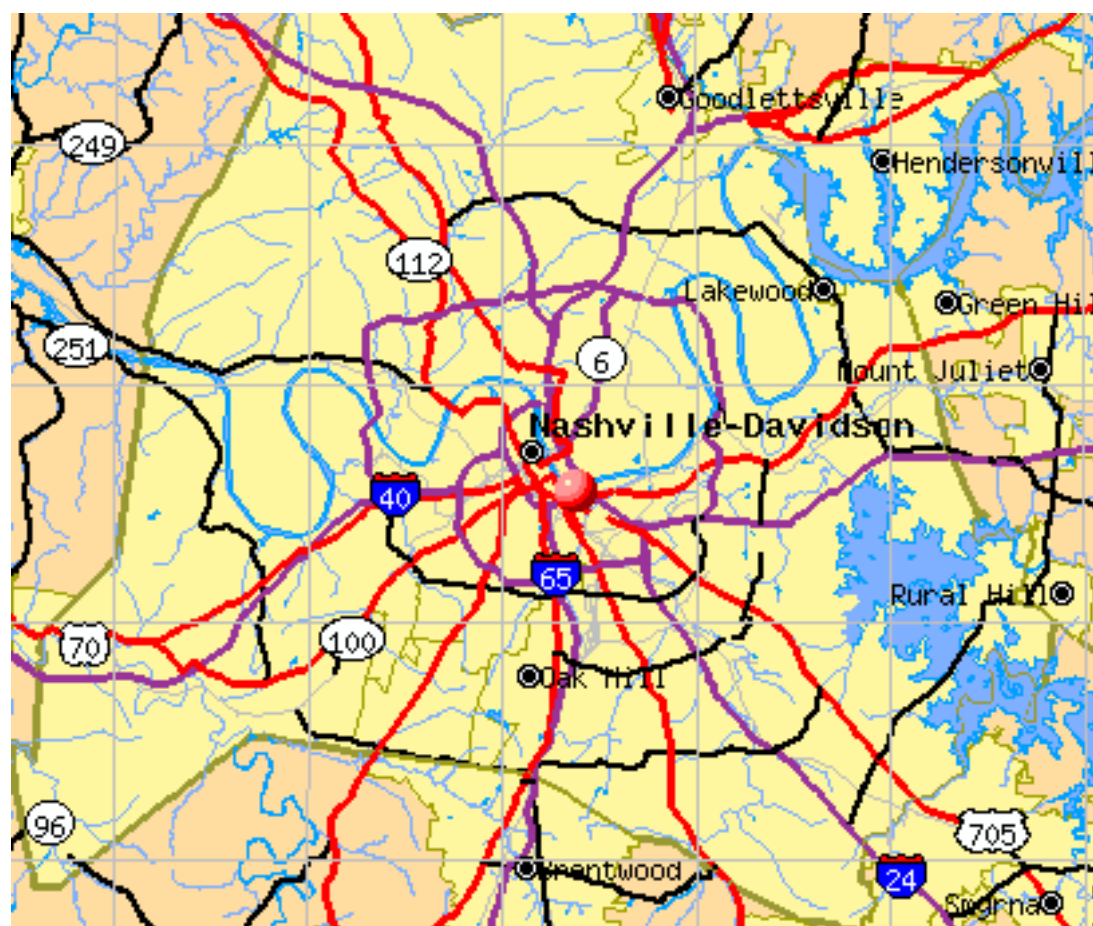
Acklen’s neighborhood is Crieve Hall and Green Hills and Cane Ridge, but it is not Germantown or Madison, as no Acklenites live or work there. One could even say that in a way Bell Buckle is now part of Acklen’s neighborhood.

With this in mind, spend some time with the map provided. Take a pen and mark your home, place of work, Acklen, kids schools, etc. (all the places you frequent). Then, connect the marks to form your “neighborhood.” For example, my “neighborhood” is a triangle from Crieve Hall to Green Hills (Lipscomb) to 12 South (Acklen). Within this triangle, I buy

groceries, go out for coffee, stop by Home Depot, and go running. Combined, this area is my “neighborhood.” What is your neighborhood?

Group Questions:

- What stood out to you about the history of the church and neighborhood?
- How is the Good Samaritan story relevant for this conversation?
- What are the pros and cons of our connection to Lipscomb?
- What is the role of flight and return in our relationship 12South/Edge Hill?
- What barriers keep us from being a neighborhood church?
- How is Acklen’s history similar to the neighborhoods history?
- Fill out the map. What is your neighborhood?
- Should we focus on the neighborhood around the building or the neighborhoods where we live?





#2 THEOLOGY OF THE CITY

The Nature of Cities

It is fascinating to see the connections between the history of Acklen and the history of Edge Hill/12 South. Before exploring the future of Acklen's relationships with the city, let us look deeper into the nature of cities.

What exactly defines a city? Some would say a certain population is a prerequisite to be a city rather than a town. Therefore, Nashville easily passes as a big city with over 600,000 people. Others would point to boundary lines such as city limits. If one's house is within the boundaries, they live in the city. Some would see city as all of Metro Davidson County. Some would see it as closer to downtown, like inside the I-440 loop. My house in Crieve Hall has a Nashville address. Does that make me a city dweller? Is my experience the same as those who live downtown or in Edge Hill/12 South?

Others define a city as a "walkable, mixed use settlement." (Keller 1237) Does that make Lenox Village (near several Acklenites on Nolensville Road) a city? The neighborhood around 900 Acklen Avenue would pass as a city under this definition with the shops and restaurants on 8th and 12th avenue, respectively.

Edward Glaeser offers this definition- "*Cities are the absence of physical space between people.*" This definition hits at our definition of neighborhood from last chapter- the realm of our presence. If the city is where you can't help but bump into people, then your neighbors are those you bump into during the week- at work, school, grocery shopping, gymnastics practice, etc.

Another important aspect of this conversation is one's posture towards the city. Are cities good or bad? Some fear the city, citing crime rates, school system, and traffic. Others long to live in the city to be within walking distance of museums and coffee shops, often paying a lot of money for that right.

When you think of New York City, Chicago, or Los Angeles, do you have positive or negative thoughts? When you think of Nashville, do you have positive or negative thoughts?

As discussed last week, for years there was a fear of living in the city, which has been replaced by an almost desperate desire by many to move back in. Many churches are trying to catch up. Many of the large big name churches in Middle Tennessee are in the suburbs. Many of these are planting churches near downtown to minister to the new urbanites. What does this mean for Acklen?

Cities in the Bible

Before answering that question, let's look at cities in the Bible. For much of this conversation, I will be drawing on Timothy Keller's *Center Church: Doing Balance, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*. Keller says the Biblical usage of city refers to a "a social form in which people physically live in close proximity to one another" (135). For Ancient Near Eastern cultures, cities were places of safety, diversity, and productivity. The thick walls of a city offered protection. The peace of the city attracted many types of talents and led to much economic and cultural productivity. Most ancient cities were 5-10 acres in size and contained 240 residents per acre. Incredibly, in comparison, Manhattan has 105 residents per acre. Nashville has only 2 residents per acre. Cities in the Bible assume a population density unfamiliar to us.

The first noteworthy city in the Bible is Babel. We read its story Genesis 11. "*Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.*" This is an enormously productive city, but its capability turns to selfish purposes. Due to their sinful arrogance and self-idolatry, God scatters the people of Babel. Another noteworthy city is Sodom. In Genesis 13, Abraham's nephew, Lot, chose to live close to Sodom and eventually lived within the city. In contrast, Abraham stayed in a more rural area. In Genesis 19, we read of the wickedness of Sodom and its destruction. Growing up in somewhat of a rural area, the message of Sodom was made clear to me-*Beware of the city. Don't let it suck you in!* Both the stories of Babel and Sodom serve to warn of the negative potential of the city. Unfortunately, many do not look past these stories to see positive potential in the city.

For some, this conversation elicits thoughts of Augustine's *City of God*. In his classic work, he lays out a description of two cities-The City of God and the City of Man. In his words, "The one City began with the love of God; the other had its beginnings in the love of self."

Jerusalem, built on the strategic stronghold of Zion, was a great city to the glory of God. It was the city of God. Consider Psalm 48:1-2 *Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King.* The city was a vital subcategory of the kingdom, a truth we will look at further in upcoming weeks. In Jerusalem, the safety, diversity, and productivity of the city were all seen as blessings from God to be used for the glory of God. When the Queen of Sheba comes to marvel at Jerusalem, the city is indeed a "light to the nations."

However, the idolatry of Babel and Sodom eventually takes over Jerusalem. God allows the city to face discipline. King Nebuchadnezzar burns the city to the ground and takes many of the people back to Babylon as exiles. Here we find one of the more intriguing Biblical views of the city. God calls the exiles (a term explored more next week) to have a positive posture towards the city. Followers of God can act positively towards the city, even if it is not the city of God. Hear Jeremiah 29:4-6 "*Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. 6 Take wives and have sons and daughters; take*

wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. 7 But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

While citizens of the city of God, followers of God seek the welfare of the city and the common good of all. This is a radical concept, and it has deep implications for Acklen's relationship with Nashville. In many ways, this is the purpose of the series.

Still, exile does not last forever. God always redeems his city. After 70 years in Babylon, a remnant returns to rebuild Jerusalem. The rebuilding process is not an easy task, a lesson that should not be lost on us. There are many ups and downs as Nehemiah and others work for the welfare of the city. Shortly after Nehemiah first arrives in Jerusalem, he rides around the city inspecting its walls. It is a time of spiritual reflection and contemplation as he considers the task at hand. We should learn from this. We cannot figure out how to rebuild our city if we have never seen the whole city. Nehemiah was not just concerned with certain neighborhoods. He wanted to rebuild the whole city. Later, in Nehemiah 11:1, we read that there were not enough people in Jerusalem to make it viable. The people drew lots and 10% of the people moved into the city. There was a movement of people back into the city because the viability of the city affected the entire land. Cities are critical areas of vitality.

When Jesus comes, he embraces the language of the city. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:14), he says, *"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden."* The people of the God are a city, a city of light to the world. We are light not for our own benefit but for the benefit of the world.

The narrative of Scripture ends with the vision of a future city. This is alluded to in *Hebrews 11:8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.*

This "city with foundations" is the eternal city of God. *Revelation 22:1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. 3 No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.*

Notice the similarities between the city of God and the garden of Eden-river, tree of life, freedom from the curse, and a face-to-face relationship with God. The narrative of

Scripture begins with an agrarian context but ends in an urban context. In the new heavens and new earth, the creation of God is fused with the cultural creation of humans—a city. This does not arrogantly elevate humans, but it does demonstrate God’s work through humans in bringing about the full experience of the kingdom of God.

Keller processes it this way: *“Since the Bible reveals to us that a city is the final result of the work of the second Adam on our behalf, it seems fair to assume this was what God had intended when he gave the cultural mandate to the first Adam. In other words, God called Adam and Eve to expand the borders of the garden, and when God’s will is finally done and Jesus fulfills the cultural mandate on our behalf, the garden of Eden becomes a garden city.”* (151)

Later he adds, *“Our eternal life in God’s recreated world will be the fulfillment of what God originally asked us to do: cultivating and creating in full and lasting relationship with our Creator. This time, of course, we will not just be tending a garden; we will be sustaining the life of a city, a harmonious human society that has developed all the potentialities hidden in the original creation to their fullest. Culture-redeemed, transformed, and permeated by the presence of God—will be the activity of eternity.”* (173)

Put simply, if our future residence will be a city, we should embrace a positive view of the city now. As Keller says, *“the city is an intrinsically positive social form with a checkered past and a beautiful future.”* (151)

Learning about the City

We are called to seek the welfare of the city. Even more than that, we are called to work for the inbreaking of the city of God into the city of Nashville. We are called to view the city positively. We are called to love the city. To love and serve the city, we must adopt a posture of learning. Over the next couple of months on Wednesday nights, we will be learning about needs in the city, and whom we can join in working for the common good.

Several months ago, I began to ask social workers and community ministry leaders, “What are the greatest needs in Nashville?” The answer was overwhelmingly uniform. The greatest needs in Nashville are, in no particular order: mentoring and educational support for children and teens, housing support especially for unhoused families, and support for refugees and immigrants.

As we seek to cultivate the future “garden city” may we focus on these areas and others as we pray, “may your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.” May we love our neighbors, beginning at 900 Acklen Avenue and radiating outward to where we live and work. Let us seek the welfare of Nashville.

Questions or activities:

- Consider taking a Nehemiah walk through your neighborhood and/or the neighborhood around 900 Acklen Avenue.
- What do you love about the city?
- Do you see yourself as living in the city?
- Did you grow up in the city?
- Growing up, how did your family view the city?
- Do you see it as dangerous? Do you see it as exciting? Do you see the city as a good place to raise children?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of raising your kids in a city?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of more rural areas?
- Do you think of yourself as living in the city or in suburbia?
- What do you think of the list of 3 greatest areas of need in Nashville?
- Which are you drawn too?

#3 The Church is a Community of Kingdom Exiles

Now that we have discussed the history of the Acklen Church, the area around 900 Acklen Avenue, and a theology of the city, we will begin to lay the groundwork for developing thoughts on engaging the city. Before doing so, let's pause to discuss further our own identity and calling. Let us seek to define four terms (kingdom, exiles, church, and community), which will work together to form this vision. *The church is a community of kingdom exiles.*

Kingdom

Jesus came to earth to preach the kingdom of God and usher in a new reign (Mark 1:38). He came from heaven to bring heaven to earth. As Dallas Willard says in *The Divine Conspiracy*, the kingdom is "the range of God's effective will." As the Messiah (Anointed One), he came as the anticipated king. Gospels were announcements of reign and authority, and he proclaimed a new gospel. "Jesus is Lord" was to replace "Caesar is Lord." The kingdom of God is Jesus' active and effective implementation of his will. It is the new Eden; the eternal city; the state of shalom; the way things are supposed to be.

The most often quoted Old Testament passage in the New Testament is Psalm 110:1 "*The LORD said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.*" The New Testament writers wrote often of God placing all things at Jesus' feet. (Eph. 1:22, Hebrews 2:8, 1 Cor. 15) To them, the reign of God has begun. Jesus was at the right hand of the Father, and the Spirit of God was working in the Church to spread the reign. However the reign was not yet complete and would not reach perfection until Jesus returned. Theologians describe this as the "Already, Not Yet." The kingdom has *already* come in part, but it has *not yet* fully come. Passages such as the following get at this idea...

1 Corinthians 15:22 For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. 24 Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

This system is consistent with our experience. We are blessed to experience many things indicative of the reign of God-joy of worship, table fellowship, sacrificial love, kindness among neighbors, beauty in nature, new births, and peace and reconciliation among former enemies. And yet, we experience many things which suggest Jesus has not yet put all enemies under his feet-violence, famine, homelessness, cancer, and of course death. In essence, as many have said, we live between the times.

While between the times, we are called to pray the prayer of Jesus. Matthew 6:10 "*Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*" Our greatest love should be the kingdom. Our greatest desire should be the eternal city of Revelation. As James Smith says in *Desiring the Kingdom*: "*Our love is always aimed at a telos, a picture of the good life that pulls us toward it, thus shaping our actions and behavior.*" (Smith 80) We cannot talk about

Christian actions and behaviors (the conversation of coming weeks) if we have not cultivated this vision of the kingdom.

Exiles

Christians live a complex existence for present reality does not always correspond to this vision. We long for the eternal city, and yet we find ourselves in the city of Nashville, a great but imperfect city. The Bible has a word for this-exiles.

When Babylon conquered Jerusalem, they took many of the Israelites back with them to Babylon. Notable exiles included Daniel and Ezekiel. As discussed last week, the exiles were to seek the welfare of the city. However, they had no illusions that their future would be contained by Babylon. They longed and hoped for redemption. They dreamed of their city.

Jeremiah 29:10 "For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. 11 For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. 12 Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. 13 You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. 14 I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile."

Exiles participate in whichever city they reside, but their citizenship and identity are always firmly with their city of origin. Years later, the early Christians in Rome would use the category of exile to describe their identity, both as a minority people in Rome and as a kingdom people far from heaven.

1 Peter is addressed to the "elect exiles", and we find this elaboration in chapter 2:
9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 11 Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. 12 Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

Christians in Rome were to see themselves as Hebrews in Babylon. They were called to be unique and different while doing good amongst their Roman neighbors.

Paul picks up on a similar theme in his letter to the church in Philippi. *Philippians 3:20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will*

transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

Because we are citizens of the eternal city, we are called to do good in the city of Nashville. But we must never mistake Nashville as our primary place of origin.

Church

The church is the temple of God, body of Christ, and community of the Spirit. Moreover, the church is both the communal expression of the kingdom of God and an exilic community making sense of a cultural residence in contrast to its kingdom citizenship. John Howard Yoder says the church is the “social manifestation of the kingdom.” (*Christian Witness to the State*, 10) In *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, Leslie Newbigin says the church is a “foretaste of a different social order” and a “sign, instrument, and foretaste of God’s redeeming grace for the whole life of society.” (231, 233). The church is the people of the already, not yet. As Everett Ferguson says in *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today*, the kingdom “creates a people.” This kingdom created people is the church.

The word for church (ecclesia) literally means gathering or assembly. The church is a people, not a building or place. The church is literally defined by the gathering, or worship assembly, as we know it. The primary definition of us as the Acklen Church is that we gather or assemble on Sundays to worship around table fellowship. However, we are bound neither by the time we gather or the space we gather in. We are the church throughout the week in all of our interactions. Whether it is Friday morning coffee or Thursday night book club, we are the church, but we must not lose sight that our identity derives from the Sunday assembly.

As we consider community engagement, it is vital that we solidify the importance of the worship assembly while realizing our calling even when we are not assembled during the week. In this regard, I’m drawn to Jesus words in Luke 17: 20 *Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, “The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, 21 nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”* As the kingdom is within us, God goes wherever we go. We take God with us.

Still, as humans, we are fractured image bearers. We are still in the process of having our brokenness fixed. Churches are not perfect. While a perfect God indwells the church, the church is not yet perfect. The church is the social community of the kingdom, but it is not synonymous with the kingdom. As a specific congregation, we must be aware of our shortcomings as well as our role in the larger body. We do not own the kingdom. We are just humble residents.

The worshipping community of believers, as an exiled minority people, seeks the cultivation of the final city of Revelation 21-22 by loving the city.

Community

When we read of the life of the church in Acts 2:42-47, we see a high level of depth and commitment. They were intimately involved in each other's lives, both in terms of availability and accountability. One reason we struggle reaching our community is because we struggle to understand community. At times, we struggle to practice community ourselves. Do you ever sit in worship surrounded by sisters and brothers and still feel a level of isolation? Do you read the community life of Acts and get kinda jealous?

In *The Connecting Church*, Randy Frazee lists five characteristics of community: *Spontaneity, availability, frequency, common meals, and geography*. All seem to be a part of the experience of the early church. How does Acklen measure in the five categories?

Perhaps, going forward, our experience of community will be linked to our understanding of baptism and the table. Throughout *Body Politics*, Yoder says baptism and the table are social acts. Our baptism is a new birth into the reality of the kingdom. The new birth is accompanied by familial status with a new people. Baptism is not just a spiritual change. It is a social change, experienced most centrally in the table. As we symbolically sit at a common table, all differences are put aside as we unite equally in Jesus. Our table fellowship signifies that we share each other's highs and lows, successes and failures. We share our money, our children, and our homes. What is yours is mine and what is mine is yours. God changes us through this community experience and sends us out to the community at large.

God makes us into a people so we can bless all peoples. The church is God's missional strategy for bringing about his kingdom. As Newbigin says, "*Jesus did not write a book but formed a community.*" (227) While biblical principles and expositions are important, our body life is what God uses to change the world. Newbigin goes on to say, "*the only hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.*" (227). Later he adds, "*It will be a community that does not live for itself but is deeply involved in the concerns of its neighborhood. It will be the church for the specific place where it lives, not the church for those who wish to be members of it, or rather, it will be for them insofar as they are willing to be for the wider community.*" (229) Finally, concerning the local church, he says it will be "*Perceived in its own neighborhood as the place from which good news overflows in good action.*" (229)

The church is a community of kingdom exiles. Acklen is called to be a tight knit Spirit filled community, which desires the kingdom of Jesus, identifies as exiles, and sacrificially loves the city.

Questions:

- How do we experience the kingdom?
- How are we exiles?
- Exiles were called to have a good reputation. What does Nashville think of Acklen?
- What is the role of the church in expanding the kingdom?
- How can we be hopeful about the church's calling as the social manifestation of the kingdom and yet honest about our failure and continued sin?
- What do you make of Frazee's list?
- Which of Newbigin's quotes is most moving?

#4 The Mission of the Church is to Witness to the Kingdom

Some years ago, I was talking to a friend with my church named Josh. He was incredibly involved in the life of the congregation. He served as a deacon. He taught Bible classes. He drove the church bus and chaperoned trips. He served as a board member with the preschool associated with the church. He and his wife led a small group. He was at the church building every time the doors were open. In our conversation, he was talking about Aaron, our mutual friend. Josh was frustrated that Aaron was not more involved in the life of the church, despite the fact that Aaron and his family attended the worship assembly and participated in a small group. Aaron enjoyed being involved in the local community. He was on the board for the local Boys and Girls Club as well as being a member of several civic organizations. He knew many people in town and felt a strong connection to the community. In our conversation, Josh revealed that he recently sat Aaron down and said, "That's all good stuff, but you need to be more involved with the church. You need to do less community stuff and more church stuff."

Awhile back, I was talking with an older mentor in another state who I greatly respect. For years, he has served and led in local churches, Christian colleges, Boy Scouts, United Way, you name it. In this conversation, he said, "As I near retirement, I only want to focus on kingdom things. I'm going to resign from all the community organizations I serve, so I can focus on the kingdom. I'm going to limit my involvement to churches and Christian colleges."

These conversations reveal various perspectives on the kingdom, the church, and how we spend out time and focus. To explore this further, let's look at a conversation between Jesus and the apostles right before his ascension.

After the Resurrection, Jesus spent 40 days teaching his disciples and appearing to up to 500 people. In Acts 1:6 *So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"* We learn several things from their question. First, they were talking about an earthly reality, not a far off heavenly place. Second, they saw the establishment of the kingdom as the main aspect of Jesus' ministry. Third, they did not see themselves as instrumental in bringing about the kingdom. That was something Jesus would do. At best, they were passive participants.

In response, Jesus says *7 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."* Jesus reveals several things with his answer. First, the kingdom will come on earth, at least in part, in their lifetime. Second, Jesus must return to the right hand of the father so he could reign down through the Spirit, as Peter explains in the Pentecost sermon. Jesus is the active force behind the kingdom. However, there is a third and crucial message. The disciples will be active participants in bringing about the kingdom. To be clear, it is an act of God. Jesus does not depend on humans, and yet he chooses to work through them. The Spirit will indwell the disciples and they will be witnesses wherever they go. Ultimately, the gospel will even overtake the cultural center of

the world, Rome. In a way, this passage serves as an outline of Acts as the disciples physically travel from Jerusalem in Judea to Samaria and eventually the ends of the earth.

According to Jesus, the mission of the disciples would be the same as the mission of Jesus. He uses a loaded term to explain this truth-witness. Since Jesus' mission centered on the kingdom, the church's mission should center on witnessing to the kingdom. Growing up, I heard the word witness in two contexts. First, in the legal context, I watched on TV shows as lawyers called witnesses to testify in trial. Second, I heard Christian talk about evangelistic experiences using the language of witness. "Did you witness to them?" "We need to go out and witness to our neighbors." The inference always centered on talking. In both contexts, witness was a verbal concept. However, the biblical idea is much greater.

The word translated into witness is *martus*. This is the same word that becomes associated with people who die for their faith. A witness is a martyr. The implication is more than just verbal. Early Christians didn't just die for what they said. They didn't just die for their beliefs. They died for their subversive lifestyle.

How did the disciples interpret this call to be witnesses? They went out and preached. They healed the sick. They cared for the poor. They created alternative communities of love and mercy. They improved their cities. They baptized. Simply put, they tried to bring about the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Their greatest desire was the kingdom. They were overcome by its vision, and they gave their lives for it. As Jesus talks to the eleven in Acts 1, all but John will die as martyrs. As we know, John's life was full of persecution and imprisonment as well.

Throughout Christian History, Christians have embraced martyrdom. Our ignorance and avoidance of this theme is a historical anomaly. Our experience of the kingdom though is linked to recapturing a vision of being a *martus*, a witness. If you are willing to give your life, everything else falls into place. Therefore, **being a witness is the daily process of dying to self and then living as Jesus would live if he were in your place.** The practice of the church supported this idea. Communion was seen as the feast of the martyrs as they drank Jesus blood and proclaimed death to self. Moreover, baptism was literally a public proclamation of martyrdom.

We witness to the kingdom by fully immersing every aspect of our lives in the story and reign of Jesus. As James K.A. Smith says in *Desiring the Kingdom*: "*We begin to emulate, mimic, and mirror the particular vision that we desire. Attracted by it and moved toward it, we begin to live into this vision of the good life and start to look like citizens who inhabit the world we picture as the good life. We become little microcosms of that envisioned world as we try to embody it in the here and now. So many of the penultimate decisions, actions, and paths we undertake are implicitly and ultimately aimed at trying to live out the vision of the good life that we love and thus want to pursue.*" (54).

The emulation of the kingdom vision is a pervasive, holistic exercise. It is not just about Sunday mornings, Wednesday nights, and programs on church property. It is about expanding the reign of Jesus in everything you do. Whether it's at home, work, school,

neighborhood, or participation in hobbies and civic organizations, we strive to make the world more consistent to his will.

This description of witness can make people nervous. At times, it made Rome nervous. We must realize several things that witness is not. It is not coercive or controlling. Witnesses do not use force to expand the kingdom. Moreover, witnesses give up the control of results. Witnessing is a daily act of faithfulness. Witnesses are martyrs, as they die to self.

*“Social engagement is not first of all to change society-that may happen but...the goal...is to **witness** to the lordship of Christ over all areas of public life and to love our neighbor as we struggle against dehumanizing idolatry.”* Michael Goheen

In the following well-known story of Zacchaeus, notice how Jesus witnesses to the kingdom. Then, notice the way in which Zacchaeus becomes a witness. *Luke 19:5 “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.” 6 So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. 7 And when they saw it, they all grumbled, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” 8 And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.” 9 And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”*

In *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark offers another example of witnessing. He argues that, because the pagan worldview had no concept of social service and community solidarity, *“when disasters struck, the Christians were better able to cope, and this resulted in substantially higher rates of survival.” ...Not only did substantial numbers of Christians survive, but since nursing care was given to pagans as well, gratitude likely had a powerful effect on public attitudes to Christianity...The evidence suggests that for the first time the church conceived of its ministry to the sick as one that included both pagans and Christians without distinction.”*

Witnesses do all of life in the name of Jesus. Witnesses do not seek power but service. Witnesses love all without distinction. Witnesses seek to promote the healing and flourishing of the city. Witnesses resist dichotomies of service/evangelism and sacred/secular. Witnesses seek to cultivate the heavenly city of Revelation. Witnesses live a lifestyle that bears evidence to the reality of the kingdom of God.

Let us now come full circle to the stories at the beginning. Josh is right. The local church is vital. The ministries of the church are so important for the expansion of the kingdom. Healthy, biblical churches promote human flourishing and life as it should be. However, Aaron is also right. While he might not have used this language, he understands that civic organizations and non-profits can be used to help make this world as Jesus wants it to be. Aaron understands that Christians must be out and about in the community to truly know their neighbors. God uses both Josh and Aaron. Both are part of the church. Both are doing kingdom work.

The mission of the church (a community of kingdom exiles) is to witness to the kingdom of Jesus.

Questions:

- *Thinking of the two stories at the beginning, have you seen these types of conversations?*
- *Are you more of an Aaron or a Josh?*
- *How have you heard the word **witness** used?*
- *How would we live differently if we saw ourselves as martyrs?*

Thinking ahead section

As stated previously, one of the intentions of this study is to consider small groups forming of a partnership with a local community ministry or non-profit. A partnership is defined as a continual commitment as opposed to an episodic relationship. It could range from a weekly to quarterly commitment. As a group, go ahead and think through some of these questions.

- *What thoughts have risen from the Wednesday night talks so far?*
- *What areas of service interest your group?*
- *What skills does your group have?*
- *What limitations does your group have?*
- *How does our current Room in the Inn ministry fit into this?*

#5 Witnessing through Service

As we talk about witnessing in the city of Nashville, we must consider two streams of Christian thought and practice-service and evangelism. Unfortunately, the two emphases have often been separated in Christian history. Some focus on giving a cup of cold water in the name of Jesus, and some focus on preaching Jesus as the living water. How can we navigate this false dichotomy and historic tension?

John R.W. Stott offers a helpful paradigm in his *Christian Mission in the World*. Under the category of Ways to Do Evangelism and Social Action, he offers three options. (pages 25-28)

1. Social actions as means to evangelism
2. Social action as a manifestation of evangelism
3. Social action and evangelism as partners

He rejects option one by saying it weakens social action as making it an appetizer for something greater. Moreover, it turns social action into a bait and switch or worse yet a form of manipulation. To be clear, social action can lead to evangelism, but it is not the purpose.

He rejects option two for similar reason. This is simply a reversal of option one with evangelism being the appetizer or manipulating force for something greater.

Finally, he embraces option 3 (social action and evangelism as partners) by saying “*each is an end in itself.*” (page 27) They are kingdom partners as they spread the reign of God, both in society at large and in the converted hearts of people.

Before discussing evangelism next week, let us look at social action, more often referred to as service. The following three stories address social action from various parts of Scripture.

In the story of Joseph, God providentially places him in a position of power. He uses his position for the good of Egypt by carefully planning a food savings program. This program not only provides for Egypt during the later famine. It is a financial boom. Through Joseph, God providentially sustains Jacob and his family through the famine as they come to Egypt to find grain. Like Daniel in Babylon, Joseph works for the good of Egyptian society. Throughout Scripture, exiles are active in serving the greater good.

In Acts 3, Peter and John encounter a lame beggar asking for money. Peter exceeds those expectations. In the name of Jesus, he enables him to walk. Filled with joy, the man runs around leaping and praising God. No conversion is mentioned, and yet God is glorified.

Matthew 25:35 For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you

visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ 37 Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 38 And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? 39 And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ 40 And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

In all three of these examples, believers witness to God’s work in their lives by serving others. Through their witness, God is glorified, and his reign expands. The world begins to resemble his will a little more.

So how should we view service? First, as Stott alluded to, service is a worthy end in itself. It is not a carrot for conversion, and it is not church marketing. In *Churches that Make a Difference*, Ron Sider says, *“The ultimate desire in holistic social ministries is to see people brought into the fullness of life in Christ. But this does not mean that social compassion is pointless unless someone becomes a Christian because of it. When Jesus healed a group of ten lepers, only one returned to thank him for his mercy. Yet this did not discourage Jesus from continuing his ministry of healing. The church similarly bears a responsibility to meet people’s needs regardless of how they respond to Christ. Otherwise social ministry is reduced to a means to an end, a utilitarian evangelistic tool. Compassion must never be used as a bribe.”* (Page 39)

Service is a worthy end in itself because it testifies to the kingdom. We house the unhoused because in the kingdom, everyone has a roof over his or her head. We feed the hungry and clothe the naked because everyone has food and clothes in the kingdom. As John Calvin said, *“We must make the invisible Kingdom visible in our midst.”* As Ron Sider says, *“we must work toward creating the kind of society that pleases God.”* (page 61). He continues, *“Community develop ministries work to shape the community to be more consistent with God’s design for shalom”* and *“serve as a tangible expression of the Good News the church proclaims in evangelism.”* (page 41)

Before concluding, it should be noted that service increases the quality and quantity of our relationships. We have talked about the need of knowing and serving our neighbors. We cannot witness to those we have never met. While we do not pursue service just to meet people, we must not discount that an increase in relationships is part of God’s design for service.

We want to see people give their lives to Jesus, but God can be glorified even if that doesn’t happen. We want to be evangelistic, but we don’t limit ourselves to evangelism. We want to serve others, but we don’t want to limit ourselves to service. God calls us to do both.

Questions:

- What do you think of Stott's categories?
- Why does God call us to serve others?
- What do the three stories from Scripture all have in common?
- Have you seen service used as a "carrot for conversion" of "church marketing"?
- As we look at our city, what are areas of brokenness?
- Which of these could Acklen seek to address?
- What is the kingdom like and how would Nashville change if it were more like the kingdom?
- How has service changed and/or increased your relationships?
- Specifically, how has Acklen made new friends as a result of service?

#6 Witnessing through Evangelism

Last week, in our effort to embrace a holistic paradigm of social action and evangelism, we looked at the former. This week, we will discuss evangelism, a loaded term which elicits a variety of emotions. To begin, let us define evangelism. For the purposes of this discussion, we will define evangelism as “sharing the gospel through words and actions in a way that encourages others to give their lives to Jesus.”

Matthew 28:18 And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age

For many, evangelism creates a feeling of anxiety. Some feel awkward about the idea of proselytizing. “Who am I to try to convert someone else?” Others might feel embarrassed about some traditions or practices of the Churches of Christ in general or Acklen in particular. Some are not entirely sure what they believe, so they feel unworthy or ill equipped to share their faith. Many have anxiety over what they would say, and many have had bad experiences with evangelism. They know how they *don’t want* to do evangelism, but they are unsure how they *do want* to participate in evangelism. Finally, some have anxiety about drawing firm lines and categories of “In” and “Out.”

Besides this list of anxieties, there is a further hurdle in Nashville. In the Bible Belt south, there is often an assumption that everyone has heard the gospel. As we drive around and see a church on every corner, we figure everyone has already made his or her decision on Jesus. If they have rejected faith already, we doubt we could do anything to affect their decision. Recently, people have begun to describe these individuals not as unchurched but dechurched. They have rejected the faith of their youth to embrace nominalism, secularism, agnosticism, or atheism. The fastest religious group in America is the “nones”- those that say they have no religious preference.

When I was in 8th grade, my friend invited me to his church on “Friend Sunday.” We were both already Christians, and since I was heavily involved in my congregation, I wasn’t that interested in going with him. He begged and begged me to go with him. Finally, he confessed, “If you go with me, the minister said he would buy me a football. Every teen who brings a friend gets a football.” Needless to say, I felt somewhat used in the exchange.

Many of us can probably point to evangelistic practices that were shallow, superficial, or sectarian. As David Kinnaman says in his researched work *UnChristian*, Christianity has an image problem today, especially among younger Americans. A majority of them see Christians as overly obsessed with conversion to the point where they care more about conversion than the people themselves.

For these and other reasons, many Christians have put domestic evangelistic efforts on the back burner in favor of service and social action. Normally, they support international evangelism and local service. Perhaps they believe, Christians in America can earn back the

right to be heard and enhance their authenticity through service. It is popular to reference this quote from Francis of Assisi “*Preach the gospel at all times and if necessary use words.*” I understand and appreciate this sentiment. Witnessing is just as much about actions as words. If our words and action send contrasting messages, our witness is compromised.

Still, referencing the Assisi quote, I believe that a time comes when it is necessary to use words. I did not come to faith through mimes. I witnessed a great deal of spiritual fruit in those around me, and yet ultimately someone spoke words such as “Jesus”, “kingdom”, “repentance” and “forgiveness.” Words matter.

Instead of rejecting evangelism, I believe God would have us seek a better way. If we desire the kingdom, we must desire evangelism. In Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost, Peter proclaims the reign of God. As the people marvel at the tongues of fire and miracle of languages, Peter sees it as evidence of the reign of God. He says the Risen Jesus is reigning at the right hand of God. The reigning Jesus is working on earth through his Spirit. As his reign expands, it expands into the hearts of women and men. People are changed. People are baptized. People are converted.

In his work *Churches that Make a Difference*, Ron Sider offers the following paradigms. Consider which of these you have experienced in the past. Which describes Acklen currently? Is there one Acklen should aspire to in the future?

Five ways of incorporating a religious dimension into social service:

1. Passive
2. Invitational
3. Relational
4. Integrated-optional
5. Integrated-mandatory

Four basic church types in the relationships between evangelism and social ministry:

1. Explicit evangelism is not part of the church’s outreach mission.
2. Evangelism is valued and practiced but not in the context of social ministry.
3. Evangelism and social ministry are integrated in various ways.
4. Little conventional social ministry is present.

Sider offers the following summary: *“Individuals need to experience the Spirit’s transforming grace that changes liars and adulterers into truthful neighbors and faithful spouses. Without that inner divine healing of broken persons, no amount of good legislation to correct social injustice will be adequate. At the same time, because sin has been institutionalized in our customs and laws, simply converting individuals without also correcting unjust institutions is inadequate-like converting slave owners without challenging slavery. Only the biblical combination of evangelism and social action can redeem the devastation of sin in our communities. Salvation involves the whole person, body and soul.”* (page 51)

Over the last ten years, God has personally brought me to several convictions on evangelism. While I believe the experience of baptism marks something significant, I believe it is more helpful to see all of us on a long continuum than just the categories of “In” and “Out.” While Jesus makes use of firm categories like “sheep” and “goats”, he also sees evangelism as more of a process than a one-time event. His relationship with the disciples is an example of this. People are either moving *away from* or *closer to* God. We must locate ourselves on this continuum and seek to walk with others. Humility must replace pride and arrogance. Evangelism is God’s work, not ours. If I am an authentic, prayerful follower of Jesus, evangelism will flow out naturally. In this manner, I can avoid what some of my students call a “*Jesus Juke*”, bringing up Jesus in awkward, uncomfortable, and random ways. Finally, in my experience, it is vital to keep the focus on Jesus. If we focus too much on the church or religion, the conversation quickly loses its freshness and vitality.

I am quite confident that God will bring us plenty of opportunities for evangelism. Through our sphere of influence and realm of presence (map from the first week), we encounter many people whether it is work, Acklen, home, or connected to our hobbies. We must seek faithfulness in these realms instead of seeking artificial connections.

One of my favorite biblical stories on evangelism is the healing of the demon possessed man. *Mark 5:18 As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed with demons begged him that he might be with him. 19 And Jesus did not permit him but said to him, “Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.”* Maybe that’s how we should see evangelism. Go and tell your friends how much the Lord has done for you.

Questions:

- Describe your conversion experience.
- How does it change our approach to evangelism if we see it more as a process than a one-time event?
- Have you ever been involved in evangelism? If so, what was that like?
- Which of Sider's paradigms should be models for Acklen?
- On the list of anxieties towards evangelism, which have you experienced?
- Have you seen churches focus on domestic social action and international evangelism?
- What do you believe is behind this impulse?

#7 Witnessing through Small Groups

So far, we have discussed the history of Acklen and the surrounding neighborhood as well as theological and biblical descriptions of kingdom, church, exiles, community, witness, service, and evangelism. This week, we will begin to see how we can continue to put these things into practice. It is my contention that a specific way we can put this into practice is by partnering our small groups with community ministries and non-profits. Before making that case, let us look at the biblical precedent and contemporary practice of small groups.

It is noteworthy that Jesus ministers to a variety of groups in terms of size. Jesus speaks to the crowds and masses. He feeds the 5,000 and heals the multitudes. Beyond the crowd, he has a group of disciples, including women and men, perhaps numbering in the hundreds. At Pentecost, there are 120 huddling together in the upper room. Within this group of disciples, he had chosen a group of 12 apostles, symbolically representing the new Israel. It would appear he spends the majority of his time and influence on this small group. But even within the 12, it appears he spends focused time on Peter, James, and John.

To summarize, the large gatherings represent the inclusive nature of the kingdom, and the small groups represent the optimum setting for mentoring and discipling. The early church picks up this model. Acts 2 tells us that they met in both the temple courts (large gatherings) and in homes (small gatherings).

Since it is centuries before the church built buildings, they relied heavily on homes for meeting space in the early years, which limited the size of their gatherings. Many believe Paul's letters to different cities were passed around between the house churches in that city. They saw themselves as one church, and yet due to space limitations, they did not always all gathered together.

Of course, as is the case still today, factions could break out in the church. As Paul warns about in 1 Corinthians, there should be no divisions among the church based on favorite leaders. Different gatherings must not result in factions.

Two things are essential for biblical small groups. First, they must not become spiritual cliques. Second, they must flow out of the large gathering and not replace it. In my mind, the practice of the latter will go a long way in preventing the former.

James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, says the following concerning this: *"I suggest that the range of Christian practices beyond Sunday are best understood as extensions of liturgical practices of gathered worship; they are important and formative because (and insofar as) they draw on the formative power of specifically liturgical practices. Or, to put it conversely, the formative force of such extra-Sunday practices is diminished if they are unhooked from the liturgical practices of the ecclesial community, particularly if they become ersatz substitutes for gathered worship."* (212)

The Sunday night or Monday night small group is an extension of the worship assembly, namely the experience of the Word and the Table. Smith says, *"the Scriptures function was*

the script of the worshipping community, the story that narrates the identity of the people of God, the constitution of the baptismal city, and the fuel of the Christian imagination.” (195) After spending time in the Word with the large gathering, the small groups gather to discuss the implications of the “script” and to personally reflect on their acting out of the kingdom narrative. Concerning the Table, Smith says it is *“our model of the eschatological order, a microcosm of the way things really ought to be.” (200)* He goes on to describe, *“the way things really ought to be”* as free distribution, abundance, forgiveness, and reconciliation, all of which are practiced at the Table. (201) Because the small group has gathered at the large Table on Sunday morning, they gather again to intimately discuss how that practice continues. The small group gathers to reflect on and continue the experience of the Word and Table.

The small group is not an internal clique but an externally focused manifestation of the large assembly. The small group is the time for each member of the body to consider and assess their witness. Moreover, the small group is a collective witness. In *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry*, Gareth Icenogle says, *“Ministry and mission should be goals of every group gathered in Christ. This ministry should be directed both inwardly and outwardly. Eventually, every group needs to consider the outward implication of its life in Christ.” (239)*

Some years ago, Beth and I were part of a weekly small group in another state, which lasted for several years. Every member of the group went to our church, and we all looked forward to our regular Thursday night gathering. We laughed and cried together. We read the Bible. We prayed together. We shared life in an authentic, transparent way.

One day, Shannon, a close friend of Beth, asked her to do something on Thursday night. Beth said she couldn’t that night because of her small group. Shannon inquired about the group, and Beth gave a simple explanation. Months later, Shannon asked if she and her boyfriend Jackson could visit our group. This caught us off guard because Shannon was not a churchgoer and Jackson was somewhat of a nominal Christian. We had invited them to the Sunday assembly before, and while they came once, they didn’t express any interest in coming back. However, they wanted to join our small group.

I’m embarrassed to say this, but I was immediately opposed to the idea. I told Beth, *“The purpose of this group is not evangelism. It’s discipleship. This group is an internal thing. If we have nonbelievers or non-practicing Christians in our group, it will change the dynamic. They are welcome at worship, but this group is simply not the best place for them.”*

Beth responded, *“They did not ask to come to our church. They asked to come to our group. They have asked to join us for prayer and Bible study. Are you prepared to tell them no?”* Obviously, she was right. We sat down with our group that week and told them the situation. Several responded as I did, *“This purpose of this group is not evangelism. This is an internal group.”* We asked them if they were prepared to say no, and after consideration, they of course agreed with us.

Notice two underlying dynamics of this conversation. First, the group members were convinced the purpose of the group was internal. While I said the group was about prayer, study, and accountability, I was faced with the fact that my motivation was simply “getting things off my chest.” It was not bad. It just wasn’t mature. Second, Beth’s friends were not seeking a worship service. They were seeking interaction with Christians. They wanted to watch people practice faith. They wanted to see a witness, but our group, at least initially, did not want to show them one.

Shannon and Jackson joined our group for several years. Ultimately, although it was not at our congregation, Shannon was baptized and Jackson recommitted his life to Jesus. They began to regularly participate in a worship assembly. Eventually, people moved and had kids, and the group disbanded. Looking back, it was one of the most incredible experiences of my life. It became a paradigm for how I view evangelism.

This may or may not happen with Acklen. **The purpose is just to acknowledge that groups should be an outward act of witness. The purpose of groups is to witness to the kingdom.**

A few years later, I found myself as a youth minister at a different congregation. A couple of years prior to my arrival, they began a small group ministry. According to their model, the parents dropped the teenagers off at the building on the way to their groups. The adults mainly focused on providing food and crowd control. The teenagers ran their own groups, and teens chose groups based on friends and personality.

When I arrived, I was amazed at the biblical knowledge and church participation of the teens. However, the church leadership told me two concerns which overall proved to be true. When together, the teens exercised a certain level of self-absorption and selfishness. They were inward focused. Their faith practice was in many ways centered on self-actualization and social fulfillment. Obviously, I’m painting in broad strokes, as there were notable exceptions to this rule.

God led our leadership to do two things, which shifted the focus. First, we put an adult in every group. Teens discussing faith without an adult is like pre med students diagnosing a patient without a doctor. At some point, the room needs wisdom. Second, we formed each group around a ministry interest. Student leaders were asked what areas of brokenness they felt called to address. They formed groups based around domestic violence, immigration support, and homelessness. Suddenly, students were not picking groups based on friends but rather based on mission. Within a year, the self-absorption decreased dramatically.

The point of these two stories is this-**The purpose of groups is to witness.** As members talk through their week, they carefully evaluate what their life witnesses to. They take an honest inventory of their spiritual practices and life values in light of the “script” (Sunday morning text). Then, the focus turns from internal reflection to external witness.

With this understanding of groups, it is my belief that groups represent a helpful strategy for our collective witness and community engagement. As previously stated, this at no point is meant to exclude those not in groups, for that would in itself violate the biblical nature of small gatherings.

Our small groups are the best means for us to have organized, regular conversations on mission. Our small groups are the best organizational means for us to approach social action, as Room in the Inn has illustrated. If something is really important to us as a body, there must be a place for it in our congregational schedule and life. When the whole body is invited to every single opportunity, things get way too busy. Constant signup sheets and church committees would seem to only exacerbate our already busy schedules.

In our small groups, we already have an organized method for members to process and reflect communally on Scripture. It would then seem that this would be the proper avenue for this reflection to flow out into action.

To engage our community, there must be time for a biblical foundation, time for deep reflection and prayer, and time for planning and execution in a group small enough for everyone to talk. All of these are present in our small groups.

Questions:

- What type of experience have you had in groups?
- What is the connection between the large gathering and the small group?
- How have you seen groups behave in cliquish or immature ways?
- How have you seen groups function as a witness?
- Why is it crucial for the group experience to flow out into action?
- What were your thoughts on the two stories?

#8 Strategy: Partnering with Community Ministries and Non-Profits

Early on in ministry, I had a shortsighted view on service in the community. I knew it was something Christians should do, but I had very little training on how it should be done. A few times a year, I would schedule service days or service projects. I would call up a service organization like *Meals on Wheels* or *Habitat for Humanity*. The conversation would go like this, "I am a minister from the church down the street. We have planned a service day for April 24. Do you have anything we can do on that day?" "Well how many are you bringing?" "I will probably have anywhere from 5-25 teens." "Uh well, will there be any adults with them?" "Yes." "How many?" "I'm not entirely sure, but they're good kids. Do you have anything we can do on that day." "Uh, I'll try to find something." Then, on the service day, there were times I showed up with the 30, and there were times I showed up with 3.

As I've gotten to know social workers and community leaders over the years, they have attested that this is the normal interaction between churches and non-profits. Notice, that the conversation is based on what the church needs, in this case something to do on a day that has already been scheduled. Notice that the organization seems to have little to no prior relationship with the church. From the organizations perspective, you can imagine how hard it would be to plan not knowing if you would have 5 or 25 teens, chaperoned by 1 or 10 adults. Therefore often, the organization makes very limited plans, not wanting to get burned.

Social workers describe this as episodic volunteerism. In contrast, they long for partnerships. Episodic involvement is random. **Partnerships involve planning and commitment.** Episodic involvement doesn't build on progress, whereas **partnerships create momentum. A partnership involves regular touches, anywhere from quarterly to weekly. A partnership involves dialogue and investment.** Many times, I have asked community ministries, "Do you have all the help you need?" They always laugh and say, "We never have all the help we need." Consider this irony. In Nashville, there is a church on every corner. In middle Tennessee, there are approximately 1000 non-profits. We call ourselves the Volunteer State, yet every organization I've ever spoken to cites a volunteer shortage. Too often, there is a distant relationship between community ministries/non-profits and churches.

Obviously, non-profits are not churches. Community ministries are service groups. Churches are people who gather for worship. Still, these groups should be close siblings, not distant relatives.

As I've worked with community ministries/non-profits, I've seen at least five reasons for partnerships.

Benefits of Partnerships

1. Churches can refrain from “reinventing the wheel.”
2. Churches can prevent duplication of resources.
3. Churches provide relational resources which non-profits need.
4. Churches meet new people from demographics they often miss.
5. Churches can learn about their city.

Last week, I mentioned teen small groups that formed around common ministry interests. Most every group chose to work with a community ministry/non profit. I encouraged them to serve 3-4 times a year. By the third year and 12th time of service, both the volunteers and the non-profit knew each other well. The expectations were clear for all. As the liaison of many of these projects, volunteer coordinators and I were on a first name basis. We would talk about the future of the ministry. It felt like a team effort. They would ask our input on future planning, and we were able to plan ahead on both relational and financial involvement. The service was no longer episodic and focused on the church's needs. The service had become a partnership as the church and nonprofit focused on the needs of others.

There are many exciting examples of church partnerships. Locally, the Woodbine Church of Christ partners with the Woodbine YES center by picking up center kids for worship and congregational activities. The Donelson Church of Christ partners with McGavock Elementary School for after school tutoring and mentoring, as well as backpack and school supply drives. Several area congregations partner with Inner City Ministry by busing kids to their building one night a week for Bible study and activities. Some churches annually commit to the entire funding and volunteer work for a Habitat for Humanity House. Others have weekly commitments with Meals on Wheels, Ronald McDonald House, or Room in the Inn (as we do).

For a partnership to thrive over the long run, it is important for the church and non-profit to be on the same page. Clear expectations are key. Churches need to be up front about what they can offer. New opportunities are exciting, but churches must be realistic about their commitment capability. Also, churches need to understand the non-profits situation. Government agencies have a much different set of parameters than Christian based nonprofits. However, some Christian groups accept federal grants and therefore have some additional guidelines. Churches should ask lots of questions to make sure both the church and organization are comfortable.

Questions:

- What is the difference between episodic involvement and a partnership?
- Why do you think churches and non-profits are sometimes distant?
- What benefits come from partnerships, as opposed to episodic involvement?
- What is intimidating about a partnership?
- How can your group be sure to set clear expectations?

#9 Discernment

Now is the time to discern the next step. For those in groups, it is time to discern a potential partnership for your group. For those not in groups, it is time to discern on an individual level. What room do you have in your life to engage your neighbors and your community? What room do you have to minister with one of the groups, even if you are unable to attend weekly meetings?

Within this discernment, there are many things to consider. First, what is your rhythm of life? Do you see needs and brokenness during the week? Are you confronted with opportunities during your natural schedule? Is this a busy time for you? Do you have young children or are you retired? Spend a few moments thinking through your weekly schedule. Sketch out your average week.

	6-9 AM	9-12 PM	12-3 PM	3-6 PM	6-9 PM	9-12 AM
Sunday						
Monday						
Tuesday						
Wednesday						
Thursday						
Friday						
Saturday						

Look at your schedule and map (chapter 1) together. They represent your time and space influence. As you look at these, what opportunities arise? For some, your job already connects you to community ministries and non-profits. What types of service would fit your schedule? I don't mean this in a selfish way, but are there ways you could serve others without changing where you live or your schedule? Don't overcomplicate it. We serve best and most naturally when we serve within our normal rhythm. I was telling a mentor of mine about the idea of connecting our small groups with community ministries/nonprofits. I asked him what he thought about it. He said, "*It sounds like busy work to me. It sounds like just one more thing...unless people are equipped and supported in serving where they already find themselves.*" I think there is a lot of truth in this statement. It is probably worth pausing at this point to consider your current life rhythm and the needs you already find yourself around.

At the same time, there are times when we have to make hard choices on our schedule if our normal rhythm restrains us from the life we feel called to lead. I think busyness plays a huge part in all of this. How busy is your current lifestyle? Are you busier than you would like to be? Is your schedule out of control? We do not wish to create a church "program" that complicates our already busy schedules. Instead, we hope to do two things. First, we hope to support each other in our mutual calling to community engagement. As I consider my identity as an exile and my calling to witness, I get intimidated. I need your support and assistance. Commitment is easier and more successful when it is shared. Second, I hope we can speak truth in love about the danger of busyness. Sure, we go through busy seasons in life (new births, health issues, job changes), but at the same time, we are not called to worship at the idol of busyness. In 30 years, will we regret our busyness if it was only to keep up with the Jones', make a little extra money, have our kids in one more activity, or do one more project on the house?



Continuing in the group discernment, take a moment to think the role of your children. What are the pros and cons of trying to serve with children? I believe we must be careful to invest internally in our children. I believe we err if we spend so much time try to reach the community that we fail to raise them in Jesus. However, what if our strategy for raising them in Jesus is serving our neighbors together?

Having served in youth ministry for a decade, studies on faith retention always peek my interest. Without question, externally focused approaches produce greater spiritual maturity than internally focused approaches. Kids and teens need relational support, biblical education, and a means to practice what they have been taught. While it is far from a science, studies show a blend of all three is a great asset in faith development. Most notably, a comprehensive study by Baylor University released in 2007 showed the highest retention rates among teens that regularly served in the community alongside regular adults. Take a moment to share your thoughts, values, and concerns about the spiritual formation of our children. How has Room in the Inn already served as a model for this?

Discernment Checklist:

- Rhythm (do you encounter brokenness in your current lifestyle?)
- Jobs (does your current job connect to a need to which your group could help?)
- Skills (tutoring, computer, mentoring, language, legal, medical, etc.)
- Schedule (which time of year is best, weekends or weeknights)
- Interests (children, teens, refugees, immigrants, poor, unhoused)
- Personality (Prefer large of small groups, Serve same people or different each time?)
- Children (Take children with you or have some group members watch kids)
- Room in the Inn (same, less, more, partner different type of year, take Riti as yours)

Selection Grid:

- What organization would you like to partner with?
- Frequency ranging from quarterly to weekly? (I suggest starting slow)
- Availability? (Be realistic)
- Kids or no kids in service? (Try to include kids)
- What are you looking for in a partnership? (Support, training, seat at table, low or high level or responsibility)

Coming Soon....
Chapter #10
The Future of Acklen and Nashville