

Building Bridges into Unreached Communities

The goal of OMF Taiwan is to bring the gospel into the most unreached segments of society, to establish healthy, multiplying churches amongst these people. The starting point of OMF's ministries is building bridges into these mostly working class communities to create opportunities to share the gospel.

This paper looks at some of the methods OMF missionaries have used to build bridges and the values that lie behind these methods. Although there is a great range of methods used with varied groups of people, the basic principles and values are common to all the different ministries.

Most churches in Taiwan rely on one or two methods of evangelism: "attractational evangelism" and/or "stranger evangelism". Attractational evangelism involves inviting or attracting people to attend our churches and Christian meetings. Through attendance at these activities it is hoped that people will hear and believe in the gospel. Stranger evangelism means speaking to those people with whom we do not have a prior relationship.

However, neither of these methods is very effective, especially amongst the working class communities. Even when they do bear fruit, the result is often that individuals are withdrawn from their communities but the communities as a whole remain untouched by the gospel.

OMF missionaries use another approach which can be described as "incarnational evangelism". This involves deliberately entering into a community with the aim of building relationships for the sake of the gospel. Rather than seeking to draw individuals immediately into our Christian group, we first enter into their community. The goal is to see the gospel implanted in their community leading to the establishment of a church (i.e. a new Christian community) amongst them.

Working Class Communities

In order to build bridges into a community it is important to first understand the lifestyle, interests, needs and problems of the people. The following are a few of the characteristics of working class communities in Taiwan.

Their work

The working class includes people in a wide range of jobs: market workers, drivers, factory workers, labourers, shop keepers, hairdressers, builders, mechanics, farmers, small business owners, janitors, police, service industry personnel, etc.

There are some common factors in the work situations of most of these people.



- They are not on fixed salaries but are only earn money when they work (e.g. paid according to hours worked or on a commission basis).
- Long work hours (often 12 hours a day, 6-7 days a week).
- Irregular working hours with lots of down-time during the working day.
- They regularly change jobs looking for better positions.
- Low and unreliable income.
- Many people work out of their home
- Work is a necessity for living. It is not regarded as a "career", or a source of personal satisfaction or accomplishment.

Their education

In Taiwan education is the key to social advancement. Working class people are often working class because they have only achieved a high school or lower education. Any further education has come through technical schools or through an apprenticeship. This has the following implications:

- They suffer a sense of failure and low self esteem. Education is the measure of the success so they see themselves as "losers".
- They often have a negative attitude to formal learning and to reading because of bad experiences at school.
- They tend to communicate orally (gossip, TV, radio) not through literature.
- They often prefer to use Taiwanese rather than the language of education, Mandarin.



Other characteristics

Perhaps as a result of many working class people's sense of failure and their frustrations with life, there are a number other common characteristics found in working class families and communities.

- High rates of addictive behaviour such as alcohol abuse, smoking, gambling, betel-nut chewing. These habits reinforce people's view of themselves as "dirty".
- Domestic abuse (emotional, physical and sexual)
- Family conflict and breakdown
- Illegal activities including petty theft, fraud and gang involvement.

More positively, working class people also display the following characteristics

- Strong commitment to the social group - family, village, local community
- Loyalty to friends and relatives
- They value relationships above personal accomplishments
- A practical "can-do" approach to life

Working Class People and the Church

It is worth considering why the existing church has been largely ineffective at reaching working class people in Taiwan. Why has the attractional model not worked with these people?

The following table compares aspects of working class culture and lifestyle with a typical Taiwanese church.

Typical church culture	Working Class lifestyle
Serious	Loud
Scheduled	Flexible
Everybody listens	Everybody talks
Sit in rows	Sit around teapot
Dress up	Work clothes
Children absent	Children present
Educational	Relational
Reading	Talking
School atmosphere	Family atmosphere

Most churches are not attractive because they are so different to the previous experiences of working class people. A typical working class visitor will find his experience of church confusing, foreign and discouraging. The attractional model of evangelism demands that people cross a number of social and cultural barriers before they even hear the gospel.

Below we look at some of the methods of incarnational evangelism that are being using to try to overcome these problems.

Working Class Families

The first step in most outreach is building relationships with people - men, women and children. This is done through:

- *Location* - choosing to live in working class neighbourhoods
- *Making contact* - taking time to talk with people to make friendships. This can be done informally, talking with neighbours or may be a more planned approach. e.g. Some missionaries regularly walk down certain streets talking to people who live and work there. Over time connections are made. People will stop to talk, invite the missionaries in for a drink, start to trust them and see them as a part of the neighbourhood.

- *Leisure activities* - joining people in social activities (karaoke, tea drinking, BBQs, street festivals, etc). That is, choosing to adopt the leisure activities that working class people enjoy and looking for opportunities to do this with them.



- *Visitation* - dropping in on people at home or at their place of work just to say hello and to chat. Working class people will often do this with their friends when they have down-time at work. Missionaries do this and then finding their friends will in turn visit them at their home or at the mission center.
- *Community service* - depending on the skills of the missionaries and the needs of the community, there are many things that can be done to show practical love and care to working class families. These include:
 - family counselling or advice on parenting or marriage
 - medical education, advice or care
 - study assistance for children
 - English teaching (although this often works better with middle class rather than working class families)
 - organising activities for youth including sports, music, drama
- *Family focus* - rather than seeking to contact individuals an effort is made to build relationships with whole families. It is particularly important to take time to connect with the family heads (e.g. husbands) since the goal is that the gospel would enter and change the community.

This method of outreach may initially be a lot slower than traditional methods. Traditional methods often reach those individuals who are interested in Christianity or are open because of personal circumstances or needs. However, what usually happens is that those who believe then withdraw from the community and the gospel does not continue to spread further.

Using incarnational evangelism, much time is spent building relationships and loving people. It may be some time before there are opportunities to clearly explain the gospel. However, the end result is that the gospel is able to enter into whole families and neighbourhoods and have a more lasting and widespread impact.

It should be noted that the goal is not just to make friends. The missionaries are very open about their Christian faith and their desire to see people come to know Jesus. They actively

look for opportunities to pray for people and to explain the gospel when opportunities naturally arise. They have an attitude of "gospel intentionality."¹

This general approach has been modified to reach other segments of Taiwan's working class as well.

Service Industry Personnel (shop workers)

Service industry personnel include shop assistants, hair dressers, restaurant workers and others. They are a distinct group of people characterised by their work situation. For example, department store employees typically work from 10 am to 10 pm, six or seven days a week. This cuts them off from regular church meetings and activities. Over the last ten years two congregations have been planted amongst shop workers in Taipei using the following methods.

- *Visitation* - regular visitation of people at their work place during slow times. After repeated visits, relationships start to form and opportunities arise for providing counsel, distributing Christian magazines and inviting people to Christian activities.
- *A listening ear* - many of the women in these jobs come from abusive or broken families. A willingness to listen and pray for them is a practical way of showing Christian care.
- *One to one/small group activities* - if people are interested in understanding more about the Christian faith, they are invited to attend small Bible study groups which meet at a convenient time near their work place (e.g. In a café, at KFC, etc)
- *Group activities* - these activities are not necessarily evangelistic. They include parties during Chinese traditional festivals, outings to scenic areas, etc. This provides further opportunity to build friendships. These activities also help to foster a sense of community and build up the relationships amongst the believers.
- *Accommodation* - many service industry personnel have come from other parts of Taiwan and rent a small room in which to live. This is often a very lonely and isolated existence. The ministry has rented a number of apartments in which Christians and non-Christians live together. This provides communal living and further opportunity to support people and build relationships with them. Accommodation is also provided for single mothers and for wives seeking refuge from abusive marriages.
- *Late night meetings* - most meetings, including a Sunday church service, are scheduled late at night after people have finished work. This is the most convenient time for them.



¹ This term comes from *Total Church* by Tim Chester and Steve Timmis. There are many similarities between their model of church and the methods described in this paper.

- *Work opportunities* - the working situations of many of these people are unstable. Others, such as single mothers, find it difficult to hold down a regular job. The ministry has started a couple of small businesses selling dumplings and second-hand goods. This provides flexible job opportunities and a source of income for these people.

Although this ministry has been designed around the needs of service industry in recent years it has attracted a significant number of people from other work situations. The strong focus on building community and providing practical care has proved attractive to other people as well.

Ministry to restaurant workers uses similar methods. One difference is that small meetings are often held in restaurants during the afternoon. This is a break time for restaurant workers and is perhaps more convenient than late night meetings. Contacts are made initially through regularly visiting the same restaurant. e.g. One church has made it a policy to have church lunches at the same place each week to get to know the staff who work there.

The Spring - outreach to the homeless



The Spring is an outreach center in Wanhua, Taipei. The street people who attend come from a number of different situations; some are ex-convicts, some have mental illness, some are deaf, a large number are alcoholics or drug addicts. The Spring has planted a small church amongst these (mostly) men using the following methods.

- *Drop-in Center* - The Spring is open a few evenings a week for anyone who wants to drop-in. During this time people can play games, drink tea, have a shower or get some "new" second-hand clothes. The Spring is a safe place where people will not be told to leave because they are dirty or smelly. They know they will be accepted and there are people available to talk with them.
- *Praise and Prayer* - each evening The Spring is open there is a short time of singing, a simple Bible message and an opportunity for people to ask for prayer. People who visit learn of a God who answers prayer and who is concerned for them.

- *Park visitation* - The Spring staff will visit the men in the parks and other outdoor places they stay. This is often just to say hello or to check that they are OK.
- *Practical help* - The Spring staff often accompany people to medical centers or hospitals when they need help. At times they will also support people who have legal or other administrative problems.
- *Church* - on Sundays there is a small church service for those who have become believers and for other interested people.

Pearl Family Garden - outreach to prostitutes

This is a ministry that has grown out of The Spring. It is a young ministry that is still developing. The following methods have already yielded some fruit.



- *Visitation* - through walking on the streets where these women work contacts are made and interested people are identified. Often small gifts or other tokens of love will be given at special times such as Christmas or Chinese New Year.
- *A listening ear* - a key is a willingness to listen to these women and then as appropriate being willing to offer counsel or prayer.
- *Monthly Parties* - regular meetings are held in a local noodle store. This combines fun activities along with a simple gospel message.
- *Special events* - e.g. a group of beauticians offered beauty free treatment to these women. This was held once a week for a month in one of the local tea houses. Other similar activities will be planned as this is a way of getting to know people and building relationships.
- *A center* - an apartment is rented in the area where the women work. This can be used for shared meals, to provide counsel, prayer or small group activities.
- *Debt relief* - many women work as prostitutes for financial reasons. Often it is to repay debts. A possible aspect of the ministry may be to assist women to leave prostitution by offering loans or micro-finance alternative forms of employment.

At-Risk Children

A team of missionaries works in Wanhua, a low income area of Taipei amongst kids who mostly come from broken or dysfunctional families. These children are recognised as being "at-risk". Because of little parental oversight they are at risk of dropping out of school, getting involved in petty crime or gangs, of alcohol and drug abuse. The girls are at risk of sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy and prostitution.

- *After school programs* - local elementary and middle schools invite Christian groups to run educational programs for those children who are recognised as “at risk”. These programs include games and activities and aim to teach how to develop healthy relationships, self-esteem and address basic moral issues. Although there are restrictions on preaching the gospel, it is possible to convey Christian values through them. These programs give the missionaries the status of “teacher” in the school and neighbourhood.
- *Park activities* - on weekends it is possible to meet these same children and their carers who can often be found in local parks on the weekends. Relationships can be deepened and more direct opportunities for sharing the gospel are available.
- *Summer programs* - during summer vacation week-long programs are organised. These are often run with the help of teams of young people and include games, activities and opportunities to share the gospel.
- *Visitation* - missionaries will visit the families of the children and seek to understand their situations and needs. Counsel and support are offered to families and we work alongside local social workers when possible.
- *Church Planting* - the long-term goal is to see, not only the children, but also other families members to come to know the Lord. This may involve starting small Christian groups or churches in the community which are able to minister to them.



These are examples of some of the ministries in which OMF missionaries are seeking to build bridges into unreached communities. From what has been written here it should be clear that there is no one standard method of reaching out. Each ministry is designed around the specific group of people being reached. Future outreach amongst different groups (e.g. the police, village outreach, night market workers) would demand different approaches as well.

However, there are some common values that lie behind these methods. Can you identify some of these values?

Key Values

1. *Commitment to relationships* - the first stage in any ministry is a willingness to spend time and effort to build relationships of friendship with people. This takes place before seeking to look for a response to the gospel and before inviting people to a church activity. The methods used to build relationships depend on the people being reached. We often use a Chinese teapot to symbolise our commitment to relationship building. Taiwanese people love to sit and talk together unhurriedly as they drink tea. The teapot symbolises talk, time, togetherness. Taking time to drink tea is just one way to build relationships.

2. *Commitment to serve* - apart from relating to people as friends most of our ministries also seek to serve the people through providing practical help in some way. This is a concrete way in which to express the love of Christ and our willingness to give to them. This requires understanding what people want and need and offering them something that will make a concrete difference in their lives.
3. *Commitment to respect* - a danger in serving people is that we place ourselves in a position of power. They have problems and we help them. It is easy to start pitying people and even condescending to them. We seek to respect people as our equals and look to learn from them, allow them to teach us and help us as well. Someone once said that the best way to reach restaurant workers is to learn to squat! When they are on the roadside squatting to cut vegetables or wash dishes, we need to be willing to squat beside them - being with them as equals, sometimes helping them, and sometimes being helped by them.
4. *Meet people where they are at* - much traditional outreach asks people to come to us, to our buildings, to our meetings. We feel comfortable with this, but often the people we invite feel uncomfortable. Our outreach starts by considering the convenience and comfort of the people we are reaching. We go to where they are - their homes, their workplace, the streets where they live. A lot of pioneering work starts by simply walking on the streets through markets and parks and meeting people where they are everyday and talking to them there. We also arrange activities at times when it is convenient for them.
5. *Reaching communities, not individuals* - the greatest impact for the gospel will be made when whole families and communities come to the Lord. Rather than just trying to contact individuals who may believe, we seek to introduce the gospel to the community as a whole. This is partly done through meeting people where they are in their families and regular places of work and leisure. It also happens by deliberately arranging activities to which whole families can be invited. Finally, communities are reached by focusing especially on family and community leaders. Much mission work has been done amongst women and children as they are generally more receptive. However, if they choose to believe they often face family rejection and may have little influence on their community. Community leaders may be less receptive, but when they do respond to the gospel they open a door for the gospel to spread through the community and through their extended family. In Taiwanese working class communities these key people are often the men (husbands and fathers) and also the elderly women who carry authority and often ensure the family continues the tradition of ancestor worship. The churches that are planted are often built around these family units and grow through family networks.



6. *Team work* - all of this can be achieved much more easily through working in a team. The ministry is not just one Christian trying to enter and influence a whole community, but a group of Christians working together. A team enables people to make use of different spiritual gifts and specialised skills. It is also much easier to enter into an unreached community with two or more colleagues who can encourage one another. The team may include a mix of full-time workers and volunteers, overseas missionaries and Taiwanese believers. In effect this involves a community of believers.

In summary the work can be simply described as that of *building Christian communities*. This is just another way of saying, "church planting". However, it draws attention to the fact that church is essentially a Christ-centered community. Community is in focus at each step of these ministries - a community of believers (the missionary team) enters the unreached community so that, through the gospel, a new community (the church plant) may be established. The end-point of the missionary task is seeing this new community continuing to grow, replicate and spread the gospel through the wider community in which they live. Although one-to-one evangelism often takes place, this is in the context of a community of believers from beginning to end.

The apostle Paul wrote,

"We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us." (1 Thess. 2:8).

This verse sums up the attitude of incarnational evangelism. Preaching of the gospel is central, but it is done along with a willingness to give ourselves wholeheartedly to people. The most effective missionaries are those who, like Paul, are willing to love the people amongst whom they work. It is through love that bridges for the gospel are built into people's lives.

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