

Transformation in Cincinnati

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A couple of years ago, I started a conversation with Chuck Proudfit about the things that are happening in the marketplace in Cincinnati. Chuck is the founder of an innovative workplace ministry called At Work on Purpose (AWOP).

In August 2011 Chuck invited me to "take a look under the hood" to see what makes AWOP work. I set out with two goals: (1) to get a sense of what was really happening (quantitatively and qualitatively), and (2) to identify elements of the Cincinnati movement that could be transferable to other city transformation efforts.

Chuck is an extremely energetic person. For example, we were scheduled to meet in my hotel lobby for our most recent meeting. He pulled up right on time, leapt from his car bounded across the lobby, and vigorously shook my hand. He seems to bring this kinetic personality to all he does. Likewise, his enthusiasm for extending the Kingdom of God in the marketplace is contagious. Chuck is a Harvard Business School graduate, originally coming to Cincinnati to work in brand management with Proctor and Gamble. He continues to run a successful consulting company and has fulfilled several notable leadership roles in both business and church arenas. Before starting AWOP in 2003, he took a year to informally poll over 200 people in an effort to identify the challenges, struggles, and needs of Christians in the marketplace. Armed with this information he began to craft the message and the approach that became the foundation of AWOP, and remains their focus to this day.

AWOP's Mission

AWOP's mission is to bring transformation to the work world one work life at a time, one work place at a time, and one work community at a time. Their objective is to provide solutions for four universal struggles Christians in the marketplace face.

- STRUGGLE: Calling versus Career.
 - SOLUTION: **Define Purpose.** Bring clear, compelling focus to work by seeking truth, embracing God's will. Matthew 22:37-38
- STRUGGLE: Righteousness versus Compromise.
 - SOLUTION: **Lead Pursuit.** Bring Biblically based behavior to work for serving others, creating a compelling witness. Matthew 22:39-40
- STRUGGLE: Improvement versus Stagnation
 - SOLUTION: **Grow People.** Bring professional and personal development to work by sharing wisdom, becoming more like Christ. Matthew 28:19-20
- STRUGGLE: Stewardship versus Ownership
 - SOLUTION: **Extend Prosperity.** Bring charitable contribution to work for strengthening community, advancing God's Kingdom. Matthew 25:14-46

They use a variety of methods in accomplishing this mission: coaching, chaplaincy, evangelism, executive roundtables, BizNistry®, consulting, and events.

What's Going On

There are about 5,000 marketplace Christians in the greater Cincinnati area involved in AWOP. They can be broken into three categories based on level of engagement.

1. **Interested in Transformation** The majority of those AWOP reaches could be typified as being interested in transformation. They are primarily just listening and receiving from the ministry of AWOP.
2. **Engaged in Transformation** A rather significant number of participants, about 2,000 people, are what we are calling engaged in transformation. They are trying to apply the AWOP principles in their lives and work place, as evidenced by their correspondence with AWOP.
3. **Activists for Transformation** The third group is small, only about 150 people, and is made up of what we could call activists for transformation. They are strategizing, advocating, and working for city and marketplace transformation. I had the pleasure of meeting about 40 people in this category; their level of influence and commitment is impressive. They are primarily entrepreneurs, c-level executives, top-flight professionals, and community leaders.

The activists are involved in AWOP in many ways. Most are committed to seeing transformation in their particular sphere of influence. A small group runBizNistries®, for profit businesses run as economic engines for ministry. About 100 of them are involved in executive roundtables. Interestingly, these roundtables have moved beyond the typical model – an executive seeking solutions for his or her business – to become something akin to transformation incubators. The results of these executive roundtables include several city-wide initiatives such as Pray 4 Cincinnati, an employment initiative, efforts to eradicate systemic poverty, church based marketplace ministry.

Bigger than Cincinnati?

Once I understood what was happening in Cincinnati, I set about trying to reach my second goal – to identify elements of the Cincinnati movement that could be transferable to other city transformation efforts. What is happening in Cincinnati is bigger than Cincinnati. There are four transferable elements to this city transformation which could apply to others around the nation and the world.

1. **Geographic Focus** The geographic focus of AWOP provides several things: a context and some inherent goals. These combine to make the efforts of the group significantly more concrete (answering who, what, where) and more measurable in people's minds. As Chuck says, "we can get our arms around Cincinnati."
2. **Message Focus and Saturation** Chuck was very intentional from the beginning of AWOP to create a consistent message and approach that has been trumpeted throughout the life of the ministry. This differs from many other marketplace ministries which have a fragmented message. Using their consistent message, they have sounded a clear call and

created a compelling picture of what it looks like to live out a Christian commitment in the marketplace.

3. **Intentionally Fostering Connections** They have regularly conducted events and programs that allowed people to find each other and connect.
4. **Strategic Mobilization of Quality Leadership** They have done well to mobilize the right people, the connectors, mavens and salespeople, as Malcolm Gladwell, writer for the New Yorker Magazine, would call them. The influence of this group is a big part of why so much is happening in Cincinnati. This element is potentially the least transferable, as it seems that you need someone like Chuck Proudfoot to be a lightning rod to attract, motivate, and mobilize this influential group. That person must be someone of stature, character, competence, charisma, and energy I might add, to get high quality people to do the work. When I questioned Chuck about this, he said, "The key is to find other cities where this kind of leadership is already in place."

Conclusion

AWOP is by no means a closed system. There are other factors in Cincinnati that are contributing to its transformation. The sense of need for transformation in the city is acute. High levels of poverty, as well as racial and economic divisions, have made the area ripe and receptive to the message of transformation. Multiple civic and faith groups are attempting to make changes and "transformation" has become something of a buzz word.

In addition to this, there are conditions reminiscent of the cluster concept popularized by Michael Porter. The cluster concept suggests that when you geographically group complementary businesses and industries it creates synergy that increases opportunity, productivity, innovation, etc. It stands to reason that a similar dynamic could exist in city transformation efforts. If so, much of this cluster exists within AWOP or is in some way related. However, it is important to note that there are other synergistic efforts taking place that are not under the AWOP banner.

The researcher in me likes to deconstruct things and find causality; nevertheless, I feel compelled to attribute much of this cluster to the hand of Providence. God is at work in Cincinnati, and His people have responded in obedience. Finally and very importantly, the church in Cincinnati is praying for transformation in general, and for transformation in the marketplace in particular. I do believe that much of what is happening in Cincinnati is transferable, and I hope that a comparison with other city transformation efforts provides us with patterns, strategies, and best practices.