

Moving Churches into an Incarnational Presence on the Field

*An Interview with Larry McCrary
of The Upstream Collective*

Larry McCrary will be one of the keynote speakers at Catalyst's **Interchange 2010 Conference** to be held December 1-2 focused on the topic of **"Mobilizing Next-Generation Churches."** The Upstream Collective that Larry co-founded has tapped into a rich vein of younger church leaders' interest in global engagement. We asked Larry to introduce us to what they are doing and why he believes it is proving effective. Read this issue of *Postings*, then register for the [conference](#) to hear more and interact with Larry personally.



Catalyst: Larry, you cofounded an organization called **The Upstream Collective**. That's an interesting name. Where did it come from?

Larry: The "collective" part is pretty easy. We didn't want it to be just a couple of us, but "tribes" of people including field workers and churches with good chemistry between them. Since communication is essential to partnership, from the beginning we have emphasized writing, blogging, and Facebooking to develop relationships.

"Upstream" refers to going against the current. We wanted to stay away from the structured look of an organization. We are pushing the envelope, going to the edge of the way that missions is perceived. We take an incarnational approach—people living among those they want to reach. But it's also churches in the States finding ways to have an incarnational presence on the field. Our goal is not to focus on us but to emphasize that the church is central. Our core purpose is to facilitate the church thinking and acting as a missionary.

Catalyst: What makes **The Upstream Collective** unique?

Larry: Our end game is to help churches to think and act like good missionaries. That involves helping churches to

have cross-cultural ministries in their own communities as well as overseas, based on solid missiological principles.

We have defined three methods:

We try to influence the conversation of mission. There are 4,000 new churches planted in North America each year. We feel like our niche is to work with these younger churches and to see a global aspect of missions implanted into their DNA from the beginning. Put another way, we want to help make sure that there is "mission" in "missional." In

order to influence the conversation, we use Facebook, Twitter, and blogs. (One of our workers makes sure we get the right Twitter followers.) We are publishing an e-book. We go to conferences not to have booths but to be a part of the dialog and try to influence the conversation of mission.



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We challenge churches to engage globally—often suggesting ways they have not previously considered. One example—having a reverse missions trip where the church goes to the field as learners rather than as doers. When a church offered to run a soccer camp in Spain, we proposed that instead they send a team to participate in a camp along-



side the Spanish campers. We challenged them to come and live shoulder to shoulder with the kids they wanted to reach and just hang out with them.

We point churches to on-field partners with whom they can implement these principles and ideas. One of our core roles is providing “strategic introductions.” We are building a network of people across Europe and beyond who are looking for partnerships. Currently we have an average of 75+ churches calling us on a weekly basis asking about getting involved. Many are looking for an introduction to a field partner. We work with field partners to make partnerships a key part of their missionary strategy. We want them to be proactive rather than simply react to a request from a church.

One of the things that makes us unique is our response time. Churches often perceive that the traditional channels are bureaucratic, and they don’t want to get bogged down. We try within 24 hours of a contact to get them a connection with the field. Once that first contact is made, we expect that our field partners will consistently respond quickly to emails and phone calls because that is the expectation of church leaders in the States.

Catalyst: How did your personal journey help shape The Upstream Collective?

Larry: In the ‘90s, I was a church planter in the US, and then we moved to Spain. On our first furlough, I was talking with some of the guys who had been my mentors in my pre-missionary days. We suddenly realized that we really stunk when it came to helping new churches to think and act globally from day one. When I planted churches in the US, my goal was to see a church grow and impact its community. I had a heart for the nations, but missions was always in the future tense—“When we have a staff person or a building, or have achieved this or that goal, we’ll do missions.” We began to brainstorm what it would look like if we started a network to work with brand-new churches that don’t have a missions staff person or lots of resources. How could we help them put missions in their DNA?

The book of Acts seems clear that the Great Commission was given to the Church, and the Holy Spirit was given to empower us to be on mission. Churches have the necessary tools, yet there is a great disconnect when a church sends out a missionary. They often hand over the worker to the mission agency and feel that they have done their job. We

need the mission agency to facilitate many things, but the church still needs to come alongside their worker and continue to be involved.

Newer, emerging churches are not content to be passive. They want to have a seat at the strategy table. I believe we must find ways to help churches discover their niche and get involved.



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Catalyst: What does collaboration with The Upstream Collective look like from the church side?

Larry: It’s not a set of 10 steps but we do have a list of things we think are important for the church to talk about as they send people. We have created something of a table of contents of sessions or modules that we will work with churches on as needed. We pull from that list whatever we think is their need at the time, especially missiological principles and cross-cultural training. Some of it is done online via Skype, and we email a lot. I meet with churches on a regular basis, and two members of our team live in the States and work full time with our churches as consultants, as informal coaches helping churches think through where they are and what’s next. Vision trips are another important part. When the time is right, we hand churches off to partners, and they tailor additional training to the specific work overseas.

Our passion is to see churches become senders. Although we focus on younger churches, we are currently working with a century-old church that is sending five families to Brussels. We’re working with them to prepare their team by doing their pre-field and on the ground training. Usually churches send through an organization, and we work with them toward that handoff.



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Catalyst: You have a close association with Ed Stetzer who influences many church leaders, especially younger ones. How did your collaboration develop? What is his impact on what you are doing?

Larry: Ed and I are great friends from our days together at the North American Mission Board. He is one of the most influential writers and communicators of missions because he has a global heart. We have partnered with Ed in our vision trips a couple of times a year. When Ed is with us on our jet set trips, we do a lot of blogging and shoot a lot of video clips. Ed blogs those to his huge online following and the exposure is great. It helps us influence the conversation of mission.

Catalyst: Tell us about these “Jet Set Vision Trips.” What makes them so popular with young pastors?

Larry: Part of it is having a person they know or want to know on the trip—people like Ed Stetzer or Michael Frost who is another writer admired by younger leaders. Second, we include a lot of missions conversation, not lecture but hanging-out-time conversations around missional topics. They enjoy dialogs about theology, missiology, ecclesiology, and we have been able to capitalize on that. Our team does a fabulous job of making that kind of conversation happen.

We set up visits that give them a taste of the work there. They will meet with national church leaders in various ministry venues. They interact with missionaries and national pastors so that they can actually get to know potential partners. We have discovered that American pastors want to learn from their European peers about how to reach people in a secular society. Some of them have memories of missionaries as

people out of touch with reality, but we introduce them to workers who are relatively normal, and there’s a good chemistry. By the time they leave, 94 – 95% of trip participants have developed some sort of a partnership with a local ministry. Later they come back with members of their church.

We have another trip coming up next April to Prague and Budapest. For more information, check out our site.



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Catalyst: You have also launched what you call the Skybridge Community. Can you describe that new network for us?

Larry: The Skybridge Community grew out of our interaction with younger workers in Europe who struggled with the stigma of carrying the designation of “missionary.” Europeans are often offended by the idea that they need missionaries, yet the continent is so unevangelized. A number of these young workers have come to believe that the best way to build relationships is to get a job alongside the Europeans. This automatically gives them a group of people that they interface with day to day, and opportunities to play with, and hang out with them too.

The bottom line is that many people don’t have to quit their career and become a professional missionary, just be transferred to Europe and be missional wherever they work. We created the Skybridge network for these people, and currently it is approaching 130 members, half of whom are in Europe and the other half are trying to get jobs to get there.

Skybridge has five critical components. Each participant in our community needs: 1. a sending church, 2. a job, 3. preparation and equipping for cross-cultural ministry, 4. a local, on-the-ground ministry, and 5. some sort of community of other expats that provides accountability, prayer, encouragement, training, etc. So far we have small, missional communities in 8-10 European cities, and we are getting more and more traction with churches which see this as a viable mission option.

Catalyst: How could agencies or churches be proactive in involving North American Christians more incarnationally?

Larry: One essential is training the field workers. A partnership is more than having groups bring over peanut butter. And it’s not just funding. Churches want to be at the table as strategy is developed; they want to be part of the team. We want to see cross-cultural workers think proactively in regards to their partnership strategy and to be sure that their partnerships move them toward fulfilling their ministry goals.

Catalyst: As we wrap up, please summarize your vision for The Upstream Collective.

December 1-2, 2010



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Larry: My goal is always to move churches into an incarnational presence on the field. For instance, we are working with a one-year-old church plant that has just adopted a neighborhood in London. They told us, "Can you help us find a way to engage directly with the people there?" We will come alongside that church and introduce them to people we know in London, do some Google searches with them to discover other churches in that area, and look for different ways they could engage and connect. If they join the Skybridge community, they will become part of the conversation about integration into the



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business community, and they will receive training on that level.

I see a day where churches in the US and Canada will be part of a spiritual revolution in Europe by using their resources to creatively send people to live missionally and begin authentic faith communities in European countries. God is doing amazing things!

Larry McCrary launched/helped launch seven churches in the US and served on the staff of the North American Mission Board (Southern Baptist) before he and his family moved to Spain as church planters 10 years ago. In 2008, he co-founded The Upstream Collective www.theupstreamcollective.org. He and his wife Susan currently live in Germany with their children, Megan and Parker.



Interchange Postings

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