

Culture-Crossing Skills for Everyday Use

Missionary tools that serve every church

Postings recently connected with Larry McCrary and Caleb Crider of [The Upstream Collective](#), which they describe as, “a collective of those who think and act like missionaries.” For the entire interview, download the 45-minute [podcast](#). It includes an overview of Sky-bridge (a virtual community of people living and working around the world with an intentional, missional purpose) not touched on here.

Postings: Your name, The Upstream Collective, gives us a clue that you like to swim against the current. What is your countercultural message for local churches?

Caleb: For a long time, there has been a major distinction between international mission and ministry at home. In the West, viable ministry has happened in churches. And that ministry has been safe and comfortable. Mission, on the other hand, has happened “over there” in places where we have to cross cultures.

But our understanding of mission has really been challenged over the last few years. Churches are recognizing that all ministry is, in essence, cross-cultural because our society is so segmented and “sub-culturized.” No longer can we assume that everyone around us speaks the same language or that everyone shares the same worldview.

What unites our ministry everywhere is the knowledge that, in Christ, we are all sent-out ones. Our identity is with Christ who is sent. So the idea that we can ever be in a safe, home culture is a dangerous one. The reality is that we are always outsiders, strangers, and pilgrims. So as we go into the world, whether it is at home or abroad, we need to be practicing missionary skills.

One such skill is contextualization. Context is sort of the cultural environment or climate.



Caleb Crider spent several years in church ministry in northern California before moving his family to Barcelona, Spain, in 2002 to become church planters. Their ministry strategy developed around art, social action, and culture exchange which proved to be wonderful bridges into the lives of their neighbors. After Larry and Caleb launched [The Upstream Collective](#), Caleb moved to Portland, Oregon, where he was also part of a contextualized church plant in their neighborhood. The family will make another cross-country move this summer to Richmond, Virginia.

We see it really clearly overseas. It wouldn't make sense for an international missionary to go to a tribe and preach in English as he would, say, in Texas. And yet, we reproduce the same models across America regardless of subculture, thinking that this is the way it is to be done here.

In Upstream Collective we want to help churches everywhere to think and act like missionaries in all that they do. They must realize, “Scripture assumes that I’m going to take this gospel—this universal, unchanging, always-true gospel—and apply it to the ever-changing, dynamic, and frankly sinful culture. My job is to constantly contextualize the gospel and what it means to be a Christ-follower in this culture.”

Postings: That’s really the premise of your new book called *Tradecraft*.

Caleb: Yes, we wanted to take the lessons that are learned on the field and apply them to churches everywhere. So we took a collection of missionary skills, basic things that are common practice overseas, but maybe unknown or not widely used in the West. We narrowed it down to nine that we felt were vital—things like: following the Holy Spirit, mapping the spiritual and social elements of a city, contextualization, social tribes, and people of peace.



Larry: Our purpose is to give practical missionary skills to everyone in the church. For example, this past week I worked with a church that is getting ready to launch a second campus in a part of their city they don’t know much about. They have a few people who live there and some others who are moving there to be a part of this launch team.

We did a one-day work session on mapping. I taught the mapping skills—looking at the geography, the social elements, and the spiritual elements of the city. Then we sent them out in groups of four or five. After about three hours, we came back and debriefed. It was amazing what came out of that. They hadn’t realized that there were people so different from themselves who lived in their city. It was very eye opening for them to realize that the nations have become their neighbors.

We were able to overlay the map with some things that we found to work over the years in terms of building

Larry McCrary served as a church planter in Georgia, Texas, and Tennessee before moving to Spain as a missionary. There he began to recognize the potential of marketplace believers to naturally engage the gospel in their spheres of influence as well as the exciting opportunity to partner creatively with sending churches. Convinced that God wanted to use a broader group of people and talents to accomplish His mission, Larry joined with Caleb Crider in 2008 to found [The Upstream Collective](#). Their marketplace community, [Skybridge](#), was launched in 2009. The McCrarys are currently located in Knoxville, Tennessee.

relationships. For instance, there is one we call “the second setting.” An example would be two moms who drop their kids off at the same school and then later run into each other at a local store—the second setting—where one says to the other, “Hey, your son Pablo goes to my son’s school!” They strike up a conversation in this second setting that gives them some common ground for deeper conversations.

We also talked about being alert to opportunity. Often we Americans go overseas and want to teach. But what if we instead went out as learners of that culture? Maybe we could learn how to play soccer or make coffee as they do. The goal would be to learn an aspect of the culture that can get us into gospel conversations.



Two weeks ago I finished taking a group of businesspeople through *Tradecraft*. One of the guys was getting ready to take a job in France. He felt like these skills were very important for him as he looked to going overseas. Another guy who had no intention of moving overseas said this study helped him

recognize that he interacts with a lot of different kinds of people day in and day out. He now has some tools to understand their world. He's learning how to have a gospel presence and proclamation in his work and interaction with them.

Postings: It sounds like some of these skills center on asking yourself the right questions and seeing through the right lenses. How do Christians need to “see” their own context differently?

Caleb: Once we begin to realize how deeply divided and fractured society is, we can begin to identify true barriers to the spread of the gospel and to disciple making. But the key is who we are. We aren't doing missions because it is something that we've been assigned to do. Rather, we do mission because that is who we are. We don't know what it would look like to follow Jesus without mission.

Another result of applying Upstream concepts is that churches better understand

“These are not ‘international missionary skills,’ they are necessary and vital for all churches to teach all believers everywhere and in every vocation, in the context of the local church.”

Tradecraft, pg.27

why missionaries do what they do overseas. As churches begin to understand strategy and intentionality, and what these have to do with mission, they are in a better position to hold their workers accountable. They are also prepared to come alongside their cross-cultural workers as peers and partners and say, “We understand what you do because we do the same thing at home.”

Postings: I can imagine that some of our readers are thinking, “That's wonderful. But my church is focused on running programs and meeting the budget. How do I begin to help them see this? Where would I start?”

Larry: What I see often in churches is that missions

has become a small group of 10 or 20 people. We need to help it go from a small group, almost a club, to a larger conversation.

When I talk to churches, I'm focusing on three things:

1. How do you create a mission culture in your church?
2. How do you start building and communicating awareness of mission?
3. What are your strategic opportunities?

A lot of churches realize that they've got to start thinking as missionaries because they aren't going to be able to simply attract people to their church. They must figure out ways to empower and release their people on mission both at home and abroad.

Caleb: A lot of times mobilization efforts focus around need and opportunity. We say, “There's this tremendous need.

There's this group of people with no gospel witness and they don't even have the Scriptures.” It's frankly overwhelming and it feels a lot like an assignment—an impossible assignment.

Rather than starting with the need, we start with the identity: In Christ you are sent. And beyond that, your gifts, your interests, your experience, and even your property—what you have—are very much yours on purpose. God has blessed you with those things in order that you might find your place in mission.

So it's not just a question of what is the need out there or what are the opportunities. It is who has God made you to be? How has He blessed you that you might be a blessing? What are your skills and gifts and interests that you can use to further His kingdom at home and abroad?

When you start there, you begin to get the buy-in of a different segment of your church—people who up to this point did not think they could possibly fit into missions. Then participation is much greater and financial



giving is greater because people recognize this is who we are in the church.

Larry: And the pastor is awakened and wants to start engaging. I hear a lot of them say, “We want to become a send-

ing church.” So we talk about what that could look like. But most pastors do not have the time or bandwidth to implement it themselves.

So I ask pastors to find a couple of people in their church who could be the beginning of a team of people working toward mission. I start meeting with them online and help them put together what this could look like for their church.

Postings: Could you recommend other resources for growing this kind of perspective?

Caleb: I would recommend [Center Church](#) by Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. One of my favorite parts of this book is where Keller says that churches too often focus on the theology—what the Bible says about missions (which is good and we need that) or we focus on the strategy—this is what it should look like.

Keller believes that we need to develop “middleware” between the “hardware” of our theology of the church and the “software” of church-planting practice. This is the part that serves as our philosophy.

Postings: Next month’s *Postings* will focus on Redeemer’s City to City movement and some of the lessons others can learn from their strategy. So thanks for whetting our appetite by mentioning *Center Church*!

We want to help churches everywhere to think and act like missionaries in all that they do.

Caleb: Another book I would recommend is Shawn Benesh’s [The Bikeable Church](#). On the surface, it looks like his book is about churches that cater to the biking community. But it is a good treatment of how things like transportation, or urban planning, or the environment factor into our efforts in church planting.

Larry: A book that has been very helpful to me is [A Better Way, Make Disciples Wherever Life Happens](#) by Dale Losch, president of Crossworld. It is an excellent read, especially for business people who want to recognize and unleash their potential to take the gospel wherever God places them.



For more of this conversation, listen to Larry and Caleb on our [“Culture-Crossing Skills” podcast](#) and read [“Bring Culture-Crossing Skills Home,”](#) the topic of our weekly blog. We welcome your comments and questions to this conversation.

Interchange Postings

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