

ORGANIC COMMUNITY

Creating a place where people naturally connect

Joseph R. Myers

© 2007 Baker Books

ORGANIC ORDER (read complete chapter in accompanying pdf. File)

Master plans intend to control the future.

By master plan, I mean a specific kind of plan. It is an attempt to infuse an environment with a controlled system. Master plans provide answers to future questions that have not yet been asked – that may never be asked.

Moving from master plan to organic order

When planning a new initiative, I prefer to ask, “What are we hoping for?” Your answer to this question, whatever it might be, will serve as an organic guide.

Our focus should be on the journey, not the destination.

“Where” necessitates that we respond with a place or point. “What are we hoping for?” is a journey-based question. “What” asks for an answer that will help with the journey—*wherever* it may take us. “What” also helps us recognize the substance of the journey not merely the direction or destination of the journey.

We often have little control over precise direction. We do have some control over the substance of the journey.

As I explain in *The Search to Belong*, I like small groups. I question, however, the manner in which they are promoted and structured. At their best, small groups supply an organic-ordered environment for some people in some seasons of their lives to grow their sense of healthy community and belonging. At their worst, small groups deliver a manufactured environment that is promoted for all people and for every season of life.

In *The Search to Belong*, I call for practicoiners to make the shift from programmer (master planner) to environmentalist. This book is intended for those who daringly make the move to environmentalist.

Nine organizational tools will help you discover whether you are following a master plan or an organic approach.

1. PATTERNS

Spatial observation

moving from prescriptive to descriptive

Master plans tend to follow prescriptive patterns. Prescriptive patterns are “prescribed”; they are specific, rigid, and regular.

Organic order is strengthened by descriptive patterns. Descriptive patterns have an expressive, evocative, and eloquent spirit. They describe reality. They don’t force it. We discover descriptive patterns through observation, as they emerge. Create environments and spaces that encourage the patterns of belonging and allow people to connect naturally in all kinds of ways. Begin to see all connections as significant.

Forcing connections among people is awkward and uncomfortable. Churches sometimes ask individuals to make intimate connections they are not ready to make. We need to encourage patterns that make room for individualized connections. Organic order suggests there are many patterns we can use to connect to God and others. Do we – with relaxed intentionality – create environments that validate the patterns people naturally use to connect?

2. PARTICIPATION

responsible anarchy

moving from representative to individual

Many church leaders have spent too much time on the art of getting people to participate and too little time trying to understand how people participate.

In my observations of healthy, organic environments, I have noticed the following 5 elements:

1. People participate as individuals, not as teams or groups.
2. People participate in a decentralized, local way.
3. People participate with the whole of their lives.
4. People participate in a way that is congruous with the way they are asked.
5. The aggregate of participation becomes “known” as the team or group acts, thinks, and makes decisions.

When we limit people’s involvement to only what we see or confine them to using only the methods we deem relevant - We pigeonhole them and close ourselves off to a wealth of possibilities. We also imply that we don’t trust them.

People are not interested in hearing us tell them how they must participate. They are looking to find their place to connect and contribute with others—just not at the cost of losing their individuality.

I’ve heard it said that when asking someone to participate. You should include in “the ask” two ingredients. One, you should include how their participation will directly benefit them. And two, you should include how their contribution will better the group. Basically, offering these two cost-benefits is a response to our misunderstanding that people generally operate from a position of “What’s in it for me?”

The Aggregate of Participation Becomes Known

People want their contribution to be part of the contribution of the entire group. They want to know that their individual participation will be accumulated with all the other members' contributions to provide something more robust than they could give by themselves.

“Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men” makes sense only in the context of asking fishermen to participate. It is not an “ask” for all individuals. It is not master plan language. It is individual and specific language. Jesus didn't ask all of the disciples to follow in this way. Only the fishermen were invited with his plea.

How do we pose invitations to join small groups? Mostly I've heard from the pulpit, generic initiations. Fill out a card; leaders stand up in the audience and people pick one; promote that there's a group in your neighborhood.

People want to join as individuals with other individuals. Clarify that we want to them to participate as individuals because of who they are.

Remember to Take a Descriptive Approach

Organic order allows a spirit of diversity, individuality, creativity, and wholeness to emerge. I encourage you to create and wholeness to emerge. I encourage you to create environments that foster organic participation—environments in which we contribute our individual gifts, and by doing so enrich each other's lives.

3. MEASUREMENT

recalculating matters

moving from bottom line to story

Organic order measures with story. Stories are the measure of the journey. The journey is as important as the end. When thinking through evaluation tools to measure community, story emerges as an effect.

Shared stories are the easiest way to ensure what is important is taken into account. Story helps us measure the life of our communities.

Community cannot exist without story. Stories share and shape, inform and instruct, motivate and memorialize. Community is story.

Stories enable leaders to form a better picture of the health of community than numbers alone ever could.

Is how we measure answering the question: What are we hoping for?

4. GROWTH

progressive evolution

moving from bankrupt to sustainable

Master plan models are considered to be *large lump* development – the environment grows in massive chunks... once a building is built, it is considered finished, it is not part of

a long sequence of repair projects... it is based on the fallacy that it is possible to build perfect buildings.

By *piecemeal growth* we mean growth that goes forward in small steps, where each project spreads out and adapts itself to twists and turns of function and site.

Consider these questions before you launch your next initiative:

- How much of our future will this one thing control?
- Will this one thing that I'm planning deplete all or most of our resources?
- Will this one thing that I'm planning consume all or most of the community's life?
- If what I'm planning fails, will it devastate the whole?
- If what I'm planning succeeds, will it devastate the whole?

When you ask the question, "How much of the future does this plan control?" Large lump models would answer "most". Organic order models would answer with "almost none".

Organic order models follow the piecemeal approach, which leads to sustainable growth.

"Piecemeal growth is the opposite of traditional practice, particularly in architecture, which relies on design for replacement.

Piecemeal growth is an approach which emphasizes design for repair, not replacement. As the environment changes new patterns are selected and applied continually moving the design from one context to another, replacing older designs with more appropriate designs.

This is an example of piecemeal growth, continually applying patterns to achieve something that you probably would not have predicted in the beginning."

—David Jones, senior lecturer in information systems, Central Queensland University

5. POWER (read complete chapter in accompanying pdf. File)

Authority

moving from positional to revolving

The Project Holds the Power

Roles and responsibilities are best matched to our strengths.

Our employees understand that when we take a leadership role within a project, our goal is not to get them to submit to our authority. Rather, we lead because that project "asks" us to do so. The integrity of the project is at stake, not the integrity of our position.

The point is that the project "tells" us who will steward the power during the many steps between onset and successful completion.

Everyone within the company participates in the power and shares their sources of power when called upon by the project, not because of their position in the company.

Focus on the Whole

A master plan approach . . . is a form of tunnel vision.
People may be so absorbed by part of the project that they may lose sight of what the whole project is.

Participants concentrate all of their efforts on the success of their particular “silo.” They measure success by positional responsibility, not by the success of the whole.

Revolving power brings the security of knowing that you are not the only one the project is relying on.

Cross-Helping

Cross-training is required when position holds the power because you are training for a specific post. When the project holds the power, cross-helping is all that is necessary. The project and the people participating in it are highly valued, and people want to help.

Revolving power understands the value of each part that makes the whole. And, it encourages cross-helping as foundational to the whole.

Because they shared power and did not have a sense of powerlessness, they did not need to look for ways to assert authority. They did not need to try to impose their way of thinking on each other. They were able to act in harmony with each other and with the project. Power emerged within each person.

6. Coordination

harmonized energy

moving from cooperation to collaboration

What defines a coordination problem is that to solve it, a person has to think not only about what he believes the right answer is but also what other people think the right answer is. And that’s because what each person does affects and depends on what everyone else will do, and vice versa.

We can solve coordination problems in primarily two ways: via cooperation or via collaboration. Cooperation is the means by which master plan coordinates. Organic order prefers collaboration.

Organic community is not a product, not an end result. Organic community—belonging—is a process, a conversation, a jazz piece, an elegant dance. It is not the product of community that we are looking for. It is the process of belonging that we long for.

The same is true for community. We can have some control over the environments in which community usually emerges. But we have little or no control over community actually emerging. We can intend for the process of community to begin, but we cannot create community intentionally.

Are you comfortable in encouraging collaborative spaces where spontaneous organic community can emerge? Will you be able to be at peace with abandoning master plan attempts to control and coordinate?

A Theological Matter

Do we see God as master planner or as creator of organic order? A theology of God as master planner implies that God has a purpose—even one purpose—for your life and it's your lifelong job to pursue it, identify it, and live it out. The gospel becomes, "God has a plan for your life." God has planned the job, the life partner, the house, the child, and so on. He wants nothing more than our cooperation with his plan. A theology of God as creator of organic order, however, allows for collaboration with him. We are privileged to participate with him in the forming of our future. He invites our ideas, our energy, our creativity, our perspective. He gives up a measure of control to facilitate relationship with us and to demonstrate his love.

7. PARTNERS

healthy alliances

moving from accountability to edit-ability

The spirit of organic community is grace, not law; "editability," not accountability.

Editor vs. Accountant

An editor's function is very different from that of an accountant. While an accountant's training, job, and passion are rooted in looking for errors and covering all bases, an editor's training, job, and passion are to help an author toward richer communication—a rich, full voice that is free of encumbrances. Accountants keep records. Editors wipe away errors while keeping the voice of the author.

An accountant's way to reconcile is through precise conformity to rules; reconciliation comes by way of compliance. Accountants are concerned with reconciling you to a list of behaviors. An editor is less concerned with compliance than with communication. Sometimes this means going against the rules of grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

8. LANGUAGE

future lingo

moving from noun-centric to verb-centric

Language matters. Words matter.

It may help to keep in mind what words are. Words are symbols for what we are trying to communicate.

As English-speaking people, we live in a noun-centric culture. In any sentence, the noun (or pronoun) is the most important word or idea. The rest of the sentence supports the noun. Thus, for something to be important, and to make it possible for us to talk about that important item, we must make it a noun.

So we become noun architects.

This is beginning to change, however. We are moving from a noun-centric to a more verb-centric language, meaning that the verb is becoming the main idea of the sentence. Some indications of these changes, and the influences behind them, are

- Word clustering
- Internet influences
- Acceptance of quantum theory
- Open source code initiatives

One word (a noun) is no longer sufficient. I hear people cluster words like community, belonging, cell groups and small groups in the same sentence, as synonyms. They do so because they cannot find one word (a noun) to describe the whole experience they want to convey.

Rather than create a static entity using only one noun, they instead cluster several nouns as a means of making the nouns dynamic—more verb-like. They want to describe the process, the experience, the “being” in community.

The Internet has produced a newer, more action-oriented, verb-dominated language. It has made the globe smaller and has allowed mystery to reemerge. Mystery is best described in verb. Verbs describe an ongoing process Human beings, for example, become.

So what? What difference does it make—noun-centric or verb-centric? The difference is this: Language not only expresses social structures. Language also shapes worldview. Language shapes the way we behave and believe.

Do you view community, belonging, and small groups as nouns or verbs? This is more than an interesting question to wrestle with. Whether you view these as noun or verb will affect your language, your processes, your structures, and yes, even your outcomes.

“What am I treating as noun that is really verb?”

Computer software programmers of old were master planners. They wrote the code, and you had to live within the code. Remember how you felt when you came up against something in a program that you could not get around? You felt limited, powerless.

Those in our church “programs” may feel the same. They may feel like nouns, very static and still. With organic order, we have an opportunity to be open sources of help and hope. Open sources of creativity, of imagination, of grace.

9. RESOURCES

mining wherewithal

moving from scarcity to abundancy

Master plans begin with the question “Where are we headed?” followed immediately by “How are we going to get there?” These become the central questions. They are intended to secure safety, but really they result in a plan that prescribes the “how” prematurely.

Master plan believes that all questions will be resolved by going through the process of asking and answering “How?” But many times the question “How?” isn’t a question at all. Rather, it is a comment rooted in a spirit of scarcity. A quick “How?” confirms that we are not enough and that we don’t have enough. It reveals that we may live with a spirit of scarcity.

Scarcity is a worldview; it is not necessarily truth.

When we make “How?” a comment, we reveal that we may live with a spirit of scarcity. Those who skip asking the question and head straight to the possibilities probably live with a spirit of abundance.

The spirit of abundance is a celebration of possibilities. Abundance knows there are many possibilities—some that are well in place, some that are known, and some that are yet to be discovered. It finds comfort in the number of possibilities; having so many secures robustness.

One other distinction we should make is that between the words possibility and option. Option implies that once we choose one, we must follow it to completion. The word possibility has an open-ended spirit. It is more like a brainstorming session than a decision tree. Organic order’s spirit of abundance celebrates the abundance of possibilities, not options.

Abundance Is Geometrically Dynamic

Organic order is usually not linear or sequential. The resource possibilities are dimensional and geometric.

Sometimes we get tunnel vision and think all mission must be accomplished in the church building or in the congregation’s name. The church bulletin is full of ministry or study opportunities—all within the walls of the church or its members’ homes.

A better question for the church might be “What can the church do to assimilate itself into people lives?” instead of “How can we assimilate people into the church’s life?” The church will have a more robust mission in the community (and the world) if it would try to assimilate into people’s everyday lives.

As leaders of small groups, what if we asked, “How can we assimilate the church into the groupings people already have in their lives?” It is not the primary purpose of a church to have small groups. Rather, I believe it is a primary responsibility of a church to help people live whole, healthy lives. And as a part of the whole, the church could help people make healthy connections with those they encounter every day.

A Final Word

ORGANIC ORDER

moving from programmer to environmentalist

It is tempting to think that you have to use all of the organizational tools in an organically ordered way before the environment can become healthy. This is not true. You do not need all of them working well to develop healthy environments. Do not become obsessed with the idea that if you had all of these well in place, that you would build the “ultimate” of healthy environments. In nature it is hardly ever true that the environment is ideal or perfect. Rather, when a few elements are well in place, things (and people as well) seem to find their way to healthy growth.

Below is an exercise to help assess and develop a way forward for you. For each of the tools circle a number from 1 to 10 that best describes the way you primarily use the tool.

Tool name	Master plan	Numerical scale	Organic order
<i>Patterns</i>	Prescriptive	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 - 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 -10	Descriptive
<i>Participation</i>	Representative	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 - 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 -10	Individual
<i>Coordination</i>	Cooperation	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 - 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 -10	Collaboration
<i>Growth</i>	Bankruptcy	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 - 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 -10	Sustainability
<i>Measurement</i>	Bottom line	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 - 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 -10	Story
<i>Power</i>	Positional	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 - 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 -10	Revolving
<i>Partners</i>	Accountability	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 - 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 -10	Edit-ability
<i>Language</i>	Noun-centric	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 - 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 -10	Verb-centric
<i>Resources</i>	scarcity	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 - 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 -10	abundancy

Now choose two or three that are currently in your strength set (score of 8+) that you would think to be fun to expand on. Next choose one or two that you would like to add as a strength. Now review the chapters. What ideas come to mind as you read? Develop some simple, relaxed, and fun ways forward.

This exercise will help you begin to shape an environment where people naturally connect—creating art more than manufacturing a product. Our job is to help people with their lives rather than to build infrastructure to help institutions stay alive. Sometimes we focus so much on building a “healthy church” that we forget to tend to the health of people.

Environments are vital—alive. They are not inanimate—dead. When places encourage community to emerge spontaneously, they have motion, emotion, and a living spirit. The goal is not to manufacture community. Neither is the goal to build programs. The hope is to watch living community emerge naturally and collaborate with its environment in helpful, healthy ways.