

THE MISSIONAL CHURCH/MISSIONAL PRESBYTERY PROJECT

Where We Are

At the start of the twenty-first century, the church in North America finds itself in a very different place than it used to be. Fifty years ago, the church enjoyed a privileged place in our culture. Many people went to church. The social pressure encouraged “good” people to belong to a church. People respected the church. The culture listened to the church. Politicians and government officials wanted the church on their side. The church was very much at the center of public life. Church life was booming. That world no longer exists.

It has been said that the “church that is married to the culture of one age, becomes the widow of the culture in the next age.” We have seen that maxim come true. The church that was so effective in ministering to the “Christendom culture” in North America fifty years ago, today finds itself struggling to relate to the culture, now that the sands have shifted. The church has been moved to the sidelines of public life, and many are openly wondering about the future viability of the church we love so much. The church is like Rip Van Winkle waking up from a twenty year nap. We are living in the same country, but it is a completely different world. We don’t recognize it, and we’re not sure what to do about it.

As an executive presbyter, I look out at my group of churches, and I want desperately to help them. I love the church very much. I care so much about our denomination. But, I see so many congregations that are struggling. They don’t seem to know what to do. They don’t seem to know how to change. They seem to have lost their imagination about how God can transform their congregation, their ministry, and their people. What can we do? How can we help?

What We Know

We know that the culture we live in is so dramatically different than the culture most of us were born into. Our parents could never have imagined the world we live in today, and our children cannot imagine the world our parents lived in. Change used to happen slowly and incrementally. It was methodical and predictable. We used to be able to make five year plans, and almost guarantee where a church could end up in the future, if it only followed the prescribed steps. Today change takes places rapidly, discontinuously, instantaneously, and haphazardly. It is chaotic and unpredictable. We cannot plan ahead more than a year or eighteen months at a time, and there is no way we can predict what the outcomes will be.

So many changes have happened to us all at once, that we have not been able to sort them out and deal with them and their implications for the church. We have been hit with globalization, pluralism, rapid technological change, postmodernism, staggering needs, loss of faith in primary structures, the democratization of knowledge, and the dislocation of our known world.

We know that our seminaries used to do an excellent job of training pastors with what to do when people came to church. We raised a whole generation to be chaplains to the culture, care-givers to the Christians and to those who temporarily wandered away from the faith and the family. To be a “good Christian” was to be a good American citizen. Today we need to train pastors how to go out and find people, because they do not show up in church on their own. We need to train people on how to be apostolic witnesses in a secular and pagan culture. Many people have never been a part of the faith or the family. They have never heard the stories of our faith, and don’t understand why we do what we do.

Somewhere along the way, those of us in the church have forgotten who we really are. We have forgotten the scriptural narrative. Many people in our churches today do not really know the Bible. They have not been taught the stories of the people of God. They do not know how to study the Word on their own, or understand how it relates to their life today. We have never adequately dealt with theological pluralism or how the scriptures are normative for our world today.

There is much grieving going on in the church, because what once was, is no more. We have lost something very valuable and meaningful. We don’t know how to get it back. There is much confusion in the church, because we have been educated and trained for the old world that no longer exists, not the new world we currently live in. We need skills we do not have, and we need insights that we cannot imagine. We are afraid. We don’t know how to verbalize the feelings we have. We are filled with questions like “is truth just what our group determines?”, “can people really be transformed by our God?”, and “will our grandchildren have faith?”

What is Emerging

Out of this rapidly changing cultural context and declining church context has emerged what has come to be known as the missional church movement. The missional church movement takes seriously the need to recover the stories of our faith that we find in scripture. Rather than succumbing to the old problem of “theology divides, mission unites”, the missional church movement realizes that any healthy mission is theologically grounded. Belief and behavior cannot be separated. Theology and mission cannot be bifurcated. They are always linked, whether we can see that or not.

The missional church movement takes seriously the sociology of the massive culture shift we are undergoing. A cultural earthquake has rocked the very foundations of our society, and we find ourselves with more questions than answers. The missional church does not quickly discard the questions, or jump on easy answers. It wrestles with each question seriously, in light of scripture and prayer, looking for the new thing that God is doing in our midst.

The missional church movement realizes that we are no longer chaplains to a Christian culture. We must be a missionary people in our own land. Every congregation needs to be cross-cultural missionaries to its own community. We must move from the mindset

that the church is a provider of religious services to Christian consumers to the shaper of an apostolic people on a mission to a fallen world.

What is emerging is what best informs our context today are the stories of the exodus and the exile. The Israelites spent 40 years in the desert, trying to get 400 years of Egypt out of their system. They had old habits, old ways of thinking, old customs that simply would not work in the new world. They lived in between two worlds. When Judah was carried off in exile into Babylon, they spent 70 years as a minority in a foreign culture, getting the old religious world out of their system. They lived in between two worlds. Today in North America, we live in between two worlds. The old world has definitely passed away, but we don't know exactly what the new world will look like yet. We are trying to see, as best we can, but our vision is still blurry, and the fog has not yet lifted.

What We are Doing

A number of presbytery executives, and a number of presbyteries across our denomination, have begun a series of conversations, asking questions about what it means to be the missional church in North America today. What does it look like? What does it feel like? How is it structured? How is it different? How can it transform church members individually and congregational life collectively? How can we think about everything the church does in missional terms?

Some are moving slowly, having initial conversations and beginning to read a different set of literature. In our presbytery, we have made a commitment to follow the Lord down this path, and see where it goes (we don't know yet where it will go). We have begun by contracting with Alan Roxburgh (a colleague of Darrel Guder's), who has come in as our outside consultant, to lead us through this process. It is a slow process of conversation, thinking differently, dialoguing with each other, and getting people on board. It has meant reading books, asking new questions, and training a core group of people to think differently.

We are following the Missional Church Change Model, which is a change process developed by anthropologists and missiologists, who have studied how change happens in different cultures. We are using a new set of missional surveys for pastoral leaders and for congregations, to help them see their strengths and weaknesses for this new world that has emerged. We are expanding the number of people and congregations that are involved in these theological discussions, realizing that we need skills we do not have. We need education we have not received before. We need to stimulate the imagination and creativity that has laid dormant for too long.

The missional church approach is not an easy answer approach. It is not a quick fix approach. It is more concerned about the long term than the short term. It is as concerned about process as product. It realizes you cannot throw away the current church structures and start over. Division and schism will not solve our problems. Neither is peace at any price a real peace. Unity without common values, beliefs, and behaviors is not a real unity. The missional church approach is honest about our cultural

obsession with pragmatics and numbers. It realizes that change comes from the bottom up, not the top down. Renewal comes from the edges to the center, not from the middle to the fringes.

What Does This All Mean?

There are many, many implications of the Missional Church movement for the future of our denomination. Among them are the following:

1) Our church needs to be transformed. This will not happen from the top-down. This will not stretch from the “center of power” to “can anything good come out of Nazareth?”. It will begin with people on the edges. It will be “edgy”. It will begin in congregations. We need to dialogue with people and churches on the edges.

2) The missional transformation of our denomination will be firmly rooted in scripture. It will not be a-theological. It will not be “whatever theology seems good to you”. It will happen through long conversations about scriptural stories, grounded in the orthodox creeds that have stood the test of time. We need to read the Biblical narrative from the new place we find ourselves in, particularly the exodus and the exile stories of the Old Testament.

3) It will take a long time. It will not happen quickly. We do not yet know what the answers are. We do not yet know where we need to go. The answers will emerge as we move through this process together.

4) The Theological Task Force could best serve the church by not trying to sell a solution to the church, that will be quickly “shot down” and criticized by those who were not included in the process. The Task Force could best serve the church by inviting the church into a period of dialogue and conversation about cultural shifts, grief/loss/hope, exodus/exile, and encouraging presbyteries/congregations to undergo a change process.

This dialogue must be different from previous attempts at dialogue that did not work. It could encourage all presbyteries to begin these conversations with key leaders and congregations, following a specific pattern, that will allow the will of God to emerge. It is a conversation with no hidden agenda. It has no predetermined outcome, other than to listen and find out what the Lord is calling the church to be and to do.

5) The missional change of our church would be greatly helped by the assistance of a missional consultant. Oftentimes, those of us within the system have too many biases, blind spots, and ingrained habits to guide it effectively. By utilizing a neutral outsider who is not invested in a particular outcome, we can train people on how to follow a missional change process, that will keep us from producing the same answers we always come up with.

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