

The Missional Church: Swimming in the Rapids

"The church has always ebbed and flowed, but whenever it has become preoccupied with itself and lost sight of its missionary calling, it has lost its way. Sometimes it has disappeared from view, as with the North African churches in the early years of the rapid expansion of Islam. Sometimes it has become a hollow and spiritually powerless institution, as with some of the European churches in the past two hundred years. On the other hand, whenever it has turned out towards the world with a missionary heart, seeking to bring the gospel of Christ to those outside the church's boundaries, it has recovered its meaning for being. For in reaching out in love and longing, it has begun to beat again with the heart of God, it has begun once again to reflect the character of the God in whose name it stands. The church that is not missional is no church at all. Our seeking and finding is a mirror reflection of God doing just the same - and ahead of us. We seek and find, because God first sought and found" (Dowsett 2004: 14-15).

The Problem with the Church that Nurtured Us

My wife and I walk to church on Sunday mornings. As we pass by people working in their gardens we call out greetings. One day we discussed the thinking of these people regarding church. We believe that these people, like us, have spiritual needs; moreover they have spiritual *felt* needs. Why do they not come to church for their felt needs to be met? We concluded that the answer must be that in general *people view the church as incapable of meeting those needs and irrelevant to the important concerns of life.*

In Canada there is an upswing of spiritual interest and a desire for a more holistic approach to life that includes a spiritual hunger for inner peace. Reginald Bibby is a sociologist who specializes in religious trends in the Canadian context. He states that "something very unexpected is occurring in Canada: organized religion is making a comeback" (quoted in Posterski & Grenville 2004: 6). If true, this is a vast change from the spiritual climate of a few years ago, but the church is not the place to which most people gravitate in their search for spiritual fulfillment.

If an outsider unfamiliar with church culture visits a church on Sunday morning, they often misinterpret much of their experience. The structure of the chairs and platform promises entertainment, but in comparison with the quality provided elsewhere, it is usually less enjoyable than their usual preference. They will most likely hear a monologue that raises more questions than it answers, addresses issues that do not concern them, or simply adds nothing to that which they already are convinced. The insiders are comfortable in that environment with their special religious vocabulary and rules of conduct concerning sitting, standing and speaking out, but the outsider is uneasy. To the unchurched, the essence of church seems to consist solely of a "sunday-go-to-meeting" duty - if the sign out front is any indication - and they wonder how this could possibly help them integrate spiritual reality into their daily life.

The Wrong Solution

The wrong answer to this portrayal is to argue that this description is a caricature. The wrong answer is to explain that this is a mistaken definition of the church. The wrong answer is to explain from Scripture how the church is the body of Christ. It is the wrong answer because the outsiders are not listening; they are watching and that is what they see.

The response of institutional churches is to look for ways to bring people into the church and make them comfortable. They strive to be "seeker-friendly" and they look for ways to connect people to church ministry. The concern is to lower the threshold of the church door so that people will want to come in. Although for a few people this may be helpful, for the community at large it is insufficient.

In the past the church played a larger role in the life of the community with a well attended Sunday School, morning and evening services, prayer meetings and a host of other programs. Many people had a significant connection to a church. However the opportunity for unlimited community activity and other distractions have reduced corporate worship to an hour and a half on Sunday morning. Yet the majority of the average church's resources - financial as well as personnel - are funneled into this Sunday morning

expression of the church. There is almost a sense of desperation in many churches, as they compete with other churches which meet at the same time, to make the morning service significant, relevant and enjoyable. The gathering of the people of God in a specific building once a week is the main witness of the Christian religion to which the outsider is exposed.

We cannot allow the intention of Christ for his church to be reduced to a Sunday morning event. At the same time the wrong solution is to convince people that church involvement and attendance at church meetings is the primary purpose. The goal cannot be to build bigger churches or even to plant more churches. Too often the goal of the church has been to become successful, with the assumption that a strong church results in a transformed community. The measurement of that goal has been growth in attendance, budgets and programs, but the community feels little impact. This view of the church needs to be turned inside out.

Rethinking the Church: the Missional Church

The true goal of the church is to join Jesus in bringing God's kingdom into the world. The church that is *missional* does not exist primarily for the sake of the members, but for the sake of those outside the church. The goal is not to "build up" the church - either by strengthening the members or through bringing people in - but to make a transforming impact in the world. The *means* to this will undoubtedly require equipping people for the task. The *result* of followers of Christ integrating their life in Christ with their relationships outside the church will naturally be a hunger for fellowship, prayer and corporate worship. But the essence of the missional church begins by looking outward. When the goal is transformation in the world, then Christ will build his church.

Because of this outward concern, the missional church is not concerned with a traditional form of church, nor does it lay emphasis upon institutional definitions of "church." Instead the missional church takes a dynamic approach of letting form follow function. This theology of the church is based on a view of Scripture that does not presume that the book of Acts or the epistles provide us with a universal and static description of church organization. The apostles adopted a form of church that fit both their cultural setting and Holy Spirit initiated task of bringing gospel impact to others (e.g. the choosing of deacons in Acts 6:1-4). Similarly our task is not to imitate the form of church that was fitting in that setting, but to imitate the *procedure* by assessing our cultural setting and, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, shape the form of church to fit with kingdom purposes. Our cultural situation is different from 100 years ago - and 2000 years ago! - and thus the structure or form of the church needs to conform to the needs of those who are engaging their culture for Christ's sake.

Characteristics of the Missional Church

The missional church does not insist on maintaining control of the programs. Instead of having alternate ministries which parallel programs within the community, members of a missional church will seek to be involved in existing community programs in such a way that they can be an influence for Christ from the inside. Instead of having a church softball team, the members are supported in their role of being change agents in a community league. Instead of refusing cooperation with a program for unwed mothers that has questionable values, the missional church prays for and guides its members in being significant participants who can influence the agenda. Instead of creating Christian children's programs, the people of the missional church learn appropriate ways to represent Jesus in community activities for children.

The missional church moves outside the walls of the building. Rather than trying to "lower the threshold" of the church in order to draw seekers in, the missional church seeks to communicate the love of Christ where the people in the community live. The traditional Sunday morning service is not only in competition with other churches, but also many community activities. Instead of expecting people to change their way of life and conform to church culture - such as attending Sunday morning service - the missional church seeks to conform to the life of the surrounding community.

The missional church also crosses social and cultural boundaries. Rather than seeking change in others, the missional church changes to become like others and so represent Christ in new ways that relate to situations outside of the church culture. When Hudson Taylor went to China, he irritated many of the other western missionaries who associated western Christian traditions with the gospel message. He dressed like the Chinese, he wore his hair like the Chinese and he learned their language. He conformed to their way of living and appreciated their values. In this way he was able to present Christ as someone who both validates human existence and brings transformation.

The Challenge of the Missional Church

Imagine selling your church building and cancelling your Sunday meetings. Would your church survive? Would it maintain a positive and unifying identity? The answer to these questions may be an indication of whether a church culture is being maintained for the sake of the members, or whether this is a church that has a missional impact in the community. The church building is a powerful icon in our evangelical religious experience. It has been called "our witness in the community" and much of our celebration concerning church growth centers on the physical structure. Although selling the building may not be appropriate, redefining the church as being a deinstitutionalized "church in the world" is easier to visualize without the distraction of the building.

In *The Church in Emerging Culture* E. R. McManus (2003:237) provides a picture of two churches: one that lives dangerously in the rapids, and the other that scoops up buckets of water on the shore. The missional church believes in the endurance and indestructibility of the gospel and rather than seeking protection and security within institutional walls, it lives recklessly within the rushing rapids of the world. Those on the edge will call out warning signs of syncretism and compromise, "Be careful, you are going too close to the rocks!" While such cautions must not be treated lightly, we are people who are called to live away from the safety of the river bank. In such a setting the task of our leaders is two-fold: to push us towards the rapids, and to keep us away from the rocks. We lose our calling when we refuse to gamble with the gospel. We leap with the gospel out in the wild rapids of the world, rather than keeping it safe and protected in our aquarium.

"Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mk 8:35; cf. Mt 10:39; 16:25; Lu 9:24; Jn 12:25). J. Driver (2000:135) believes that "this also applies to the church. According to the gospel, herein lies the secret for communicating authentic life in God's kingdom. It also encloses the secret for the church's future in God's ongoing purposes." As long as the church centers its attention on its own existence, as long as the purpose of church planting is to create a congregation with a building, the purpose of the church is lost. However, when the church focuses on its missional and sacrificial purpose within the world and takes its eyes off itself, then it will truly be the bride of Christ.

References cited

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