



the Gospel and Our Culture

a network for encouraging the encounter in north america

Missional Church: Initiating a Conversation

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Early in February, the second book in the Network's series published by Eerdmans appeared: *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. It represents the conclusion to the first phase of research sponsored by the Network, funded

authors. But it is not really a collection of essays. The members of the research and writing team (Lois Barrett, Inagrace Dietterich, Darrell Guder, George Hunsberger, Alan Roxburgh, and Craig Van Gelder) authored various chapters, but they worked together on the revising and reworking process so intensively

those writers, those themes, those trajectories which appeared to us to be essential to an authentically scriptural, gospel-centered and contextually relevant understanding of the doctrine and practice of the church. Our goal has been to stimulate a conversation which must obviously go beyond what is addressed in this book.

The themes which surfaced over the three years of this project clustered themselves in three areas, which became the three sections of the book. The first has to do with North America: the character and development of our context as post-Christendom, disestablished, modern becoming post-modern, denomina-

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by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts, as well as the transition to the next phase, made possible by a new grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc. We have reported on this research process before (9:1, March '97). Like the first volume, *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, this book has several

that they regard the resulting book as a common project.

One thematic question guided the research and writing: What would it look like to do a theology of the church based on the conviction that North America is a mission field? In our review of the current discussion of the church in our context, we looked for

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tional, religious, and secularizing. In the second section, we develop the basic theological themes for a missiological ecclesiology: the gospel of God's inbreaking reign in Jesus Christ, the church's vocation to be Christ's witness in and not of the world, and the distinctive practices of such a missionary community. The final section develops implications for the structures and practice of leadership, community, and connection in a missional church.

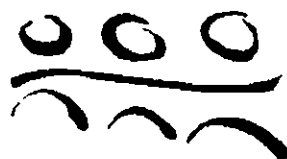
The conversation with the team has been engaged, at times passionate, sometimes heated, but always focused around the church's primary calling, to be God's missionary people. That conversation will, we hope, continue with many voices, traditions, critiques, and constructive proposals emerging. We have hoped that our work might be a dynamic part of what Avery Dulles has called the "emerging theological consensus of the church." In the first months of the discussion, we have been encouraged by the interaction. During all of last fall, groups across North America participated in disciplined discussion of the book (made available by Eerdmans in a pre-publication format). The article by Eunice McGarrahan in this newsletter reflects on one such process. Our annual fall consultation at Techny Towers (Illinois) brought together sixty people to talk about what they had read. Their conversation was informed and much enriched by three formal responses to the book, whose diverse perspectives were Roman Catholic, Wesleyan, and Reformed. Excerpts of these responses are also found in this newsletter. During the first half of this year, we are convening four formal hearings to which qualified respondents from across a broad theological spectrum are being invited. They are being asked to interact critically with this project's proposal, to look for issues not dealt with or under-emphasized, and to identify themes and concerns for the next phase of the Network's research.

Missional Church not only concludes a study process. It now

serves as the platform for more work, made possible by the Lilly Endowment grant. The findings of the current discussion will feed into three teams, each one focusing and moving beyond what has been attempted up to now. In one group, the issues of the Gospel in our context will be rigorously explored. A second group will investigate models of missional communities already at work in our society. A third group will address the difficult structural questions of the missional church at the level of the denomination – what we have called in our work thus far, "the structures of connectedness." Out of all this, a resources group will synthesize and make available our findings in what

we hope will be accessible tools for further work.

Thus, by design, the discussion is broadening to include many more participants, many more ecclesial traditions and theological approaches, and probably many more challenges and even tensions. But we suspect that we shall continue to experience what has constantly happened in our research team these last years, an encounter with the gospel which evangelizes us as it challenges to repentance and transformation into that people whose sole purpose and joy is "to proclaim the wonderful deeds of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). ■



The Gospel and Our Culture Newsletter

a quarterly publication
designed to encourage
the encounter of the gospel
with North American culture

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A Roman Catholic Response to *Missional Church*

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I believe that the bulk of material in this book a Roman Catholic should recognize and find useful. At the same time there would be important areas of disagreement. The text follows the agenda for renewal or *aggiornamento* laid out by the Second Vatican Council. This was a two-pronged approach: 1) read the signs of the times, and 2) return to the sources.

First, in regard to the signs of the times, I found the description of modernity and post-modernity illuminating. The distinction between a no-longer existing Christendom and still functional Christendom is provocative. But it seems to me that it is exactly here where your Catholic readers would raise some questions. The text, in talking about the relationship of the church to the wider cultures, speaks with great even-handedness: reject what is antithetical to the reign of God, retain what is consonant. Catholics, while not disagreeing with this, would tend to look at culture or “the world” much more optimistically. They would be more inclined to affirm that the structures of creation are bearers of grace, are grace-full. This runs the gamut from the appreciation of human rationality (not in the Enlightenment sense), to the various structures of human community, to the arts and the experience of the beautiful, to the role of government—never simply in the Catholic tradition a necessary evil.

This is what has been called the Catholic angle of vision, or, to use David Tracy’s phrase, the “Catholic analogical imagination.” Catholicism has not lost its sense that cultures and civilizations can be transformed; this seems to be the impulse behind John Paul’s insistent call on his pilgrimages for a “civilization of love.” The church may often be the dramatic alternative to the world, but it also wants to see itself as a mediating structure.

Do you remember Alasdair MacIntyre’s observation at the end of his book, *After Virtue*, in which he suggests that in dark times we need to construct communities of virtue and civility, and thus we are waiting for a new St. Benedict? I have often suggested that what we need is not so much another Benedict as another St. Francis, whose followers sought to bring the Gospel to bear on the economic and social worlds of the European culture of the 13th century.

Second, in regard to the return to the sources, I must

confess that I found the Scriptural dimension of this text particularly good: the portrayal of Jesus’ preaching of the reign of God, the relationship of the church to the reign of God, the missional dimensions of baptism, eucharist, reconciliation, and hospitality. All of these I found to be both informative and edifying. I note particularly the effective retrieval of the beatitudes.

Again, for many Catholics, we think about some of these things differently. When it comes to things such as structure and leadership roles, we would see the New Testament and the early second century documents laying out a more normative portrait of the shape of the ecclesia. We would want to affirm that, while clericalism and clericalization are certainly problematic and pose continuing threats to the missional church in which all are graced and called for mission, holy orders or the stable ministry of leadership found in bishop, presbyter, and deacon, do not represent a fall from the freedom, energy, and diversity of New Testament ministries. But these are traditional areas of disagreement, not to be resolved here.

For us it is simply not enough to retrieve the New Testament; one must look also at the living faith of the church, enfolded in the Tradition, and thus there would be more to say about some of these topics. That having been said, however, I go back to my first point: that most Catholic communities, looking for a model of renewal, could find much in this book extremely valuable. In fact the book does much to advance an agenda set by Paul VI twenty years ago when he wrote his encyclical letter, “On Evangelization in the Modern World.” In a chapter entitled “From Christ the Evangelizer to the Evangelizing Church,” he notes, “As an evangelizer, Christ first of all proclaims a kingdom, the kingdom of God; and this is so important that, by comparison, everything else becomes ‘the rest,’ which is given ‘in addition.’ Only the kingdom is absolute; it makes all else relative.” Thus “evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize....” *Missional Church* clearly takes this perspective seriously and draws out its implications with remarkable vividness. ■



The Trinitarian Nature of the Missional Church

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There is much to commend in the book. Its unique strength is its insistent missional focus. Other strengths are its central focus on the reign of God, its discussion of the cultivation and structural embodiment of “ecclesial practices,” its critique of traditional leadership models in the church, and its comprehensive and insightful delineation of the contemporary cultural context, including both Canada and the United States. I find myself in agreement with the book at almost every point....

The trinitarian nature of the church is affirmed at several points in the book, partly as a reflection on Newbigin’s articulation of this theme. This is a rich area of investigation if it can be kept from becoming too speculative, and fits in with the contemporary recovery of the doctrine of the trinity and its implications for ecclesiology and mission. I am pleased to see this emphasis. Clearly the missional church is called to be a community that is at once *trinitarian*, *incarnational*, and *eschatological*.

I think there are three aspects of this trinitarian emphasis that may be especially relevant to the missionary nature of the church....

1. *The church as a trinitarian worshipping community.* The church in its worship, and often most explicitly in its hymns, worships the trinity. Further, the trinity forms the basis of the church’s mission as the community responds to the call of the trinity to participate in the *missio Dei*. In worship the

community draws near to God and comes to understand the Father’s creative love and care for all God has made, the Son’s self-giving in becoming a servant for our salvation, and the Spirit’s call and push to go into the world “as the Father” has sent the Son. Genuine worship impels into mission.

The church has a mission to God as well as a mission to the world. There is a reciprocal action here that is grounded in the *perichoresis*...of the trinity. We give ourselves to God (our mission to God) and he gives himself back to us with an overflow of love that impels us into mission. This seems, in part, to be what is in view in John 17: “As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.... I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (Jn. 17:18, 23).

In other words, mission in trinitarian perspective is not one-way: we go out in mission because the trinity sends us in mission. Rather, it is reciprocal—even “perichoretic”—as, in response to God’s grace, we carry out our mission to God and thus are “carried” into mission in the world by the Holy Spirit.

All this is simply to underscore the fact that the church is trinitarian, that its mission is grounded in the trinity, and that in trinitarian perspective the church’s mission includes its mission to God.

2. *The trinitarian community is especially sent to the poor.* Though “being in the very nature God,” Christ

“made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant” (Phil. 2:6-7) and carried out his mission. This is in fact a demonstration of the “wisdom of God” as expounded by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:27-30.

It can be argued that God’s special concern for the poor, and Jesus’ explicit mission to the poor, is grounded in the trinity. Since the trinity is unbounded self-giving love each to the other, always seeking the best for the other and receiving back love in return, and since the church’s mission grows out of the overflow of this love, the church’s mission is to all people. But in the incarnation Jesus Christ becomes the suffering trinity, and thus the Father and the Spirit have particular compassion for him in his sufferings. This is mirrored in God’s particular concern for “the widow, the orphan, and the alien” that we see throughout Scripture. God loves all, but particularly those who suffer. It is the very mutual love of the trinity that impels God, and thus the church, to incarnate the gospel among the poor. And thus Jesus can say, in words that echo the reality of the trinity, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor” (Lk. 4:18). The so-called “preferential option for the poor” is grounded in the trinity.

3. *The church’s ministry is also grounded in the trinity.* The trinity is the opposite of hierarchy. The book makes the point that the church’s ministry, including its leadership, is non-hierarchical. But the deepest theological grounding of

this is in the trinity itself.

The trinity, and the very nature of the material creation God has made, show us that we should conceive of the church and its ministry in organic, relational (rather than mechanical-hierarchical) terms. The church is not so much a rational organization (a social machine) as it is a complex organism.

Here some of the emerging insights of complexity theory may be of some use to the church. Complexity theory has been described as “the emerging science at the edge of order and chaos.” This new science studies the way order seems suddenly to emerge from seemingly chaotic systems. It looks at the highly complex interaction of multiple factors in such systems as weather patterns, economics, or living cells. A complex system is one in which “a great many independent agents are interacting with each other in a great many ways.”¹ Related to chaos theory, complexity theory systemati-

cally studies systems that were previously thought to be beyond comprehension, or perhaps to have no order at all. This way of thinking grows in part out of the study of life itself and the complex systems that make up our environment.

It seems to me that viewing the church as a complex organism at least suggests to us: 1) that the church is a totality of complex factors, not a linear cause-and-effect system; 2) that small actions have complex, long-range, not fully predictable significance; 3) that size is always a function of other factors, not an end in itself; and 4) that “emergent structures” arise from the church’s complex vitality as they are needed. That is, the growth of the church in vitality, ministry, and numbers will often itself give rise to the necessary structures if the church pays priority attention to what it fundamentally is in Christ.

The complexity perspective suggests that missional churches will focus on the multiple small actions

that collectively give visible expression to the life of Jesus Christ in the world. Missional churches will pay attention to the many small things that constitute the church’s vitality—as well as watching for the small things that destroy life, whether a lying tongue, an unkind word, unresolved conflict, or a seemingly innocent but outdated tradition. More basically, the complexity model means we should understand the vital importance of Christian character and community in the life of the church. Too often in the church we focus on trying to get people to *do* things rather than on helping them to *become* the disciples God intends. Of course, our actions do build or destroy character; this is not an either/or dynamic. ■

¹ M. Mitchell Waldrop, *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), p. 11.

Ecclesial Accountability in the Missional Church

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What the authors of *Missional Church* have collectively done is to advance significantly the gospel and culture discussion by attending to the central problem of ecclesiology—a problem which, in our time, the European churches have responded to by and large defensively, and the North American churches with their denominational system have ignored as unimportant. The churches of the South and the Eastern parts of the world, meanwhile, have largely alternated in their ecclesiologies

between the two centers of actual and functional Christendom (Europe and North America, respectively), contrary select examples from Latin America and Africa notwithstanding.

The analysis contained within *Missional Church* is clear and compelling: neither of these two forms of Christendom are adequate to the challenge of contemporary North American cultures or to the calling of God to God’s people announced in the scriptures and through Jesus Christ. Where others have previously

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articulated well the gospel and culture relation, this book represents the first sustained attempt about which I am aware to answer the question, "Where does that leave the church?"

I applaud and value the beginning of this conversation. Because of that I wish to offer a number of critical observations which will need to be addressed if we are to move the conversation into the lived discipleship of the millions of North Americans who call themselves Christian and who could yet be converted to being part of a sent-by-God people.... I would like especially to comment on the theme of ecclesial accountability.

The book's discussion of missional structures and of connectedness is very congenial to my way of thinking. This material will be very worrisome to some in existing church structures who subscribe to the "kill it before it grows" view of parachurch movements, local initiatives within their related congregations, and structures of ascending accountability. I have some experience biting that hand and, believe me, it knows how to slap back. Despite my obvious sympathies, I think that this wonderful ecclesiology is just beginning to address issues of ecclesial accountability at both the level of particular community and that of missional connectedness. Let me raise just three of these tough questions.

1. What kind of accountability do particular communities have to a holistic understanding of the gospel? If we begin recognizing that some special mission churches or movements might be legitimate expressions for our time of God's sent people (a Christian college led by and for the deaf, for example), how do we rule some expressions out (an Aryan White People's Church of Jesus Christ, for example)? I believe if we start asking those kinds of questions, we might further elaborate what One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic mean for the expanded set of movements of people and spirit we would now like to assign the name "church." Moving out beyond the shadow definition of church by the Reformers (the place

where the word of God is preached and the sacraments rightly administered) calls for a thick description of what acceptable and deponent particular faith expressions might look like.

2. The second question is this: if sunset laws and other organizational fixes will not save us when it comes to real missional connectedness, then what are the further marks of inter-community faithfulness? *Missional Church* lays bare the limitations of both a purely functional understanding of larger church structures (where congregations are the only real church) and top down understandings that elevate *episcopate* above the *missio Dei*. More organic expressions of the larger church require discussion about the sources of faithful oversight and Christian mutuality among diverse groups of stronger and weaker disciples. Some of these sources may be biblical and traditional church recoveries. Some may also be borrowings from the larger culture that are defensible in light of our prior theological commitments. And that leads me to plea for a full cultural awareness concerning the church. Even in theologizing about the form of the church and its structures, we must ask the cultural question, "Will people living in 21st century North America be able to understand this?"

3. What does catholicity, or for that matter, unity, mean where there is such vociferous disagreement about the role of gays and lesbians in the contemporary churches? Likewise, if the holiness of the church means that the church practices "forgiveness, fosters healing and reconciliation, makes peace, loves righteousness ... with the 'least of these my brethren,'" how would that holiness be enfolded in a world of transnational corporations, supreme courts, and organized death-dealing structures, both rogue and government sponsored? We are all very aware of the limited utility of large-scale old-line corporate witness strategies, but are we willing to experiment for the sake of faithfulness with *some* large-scale expressions of connectedness that can

interface with the large-scale powers and principalities of our time? I hope we will, and I hope we will not allow this ecclesiology to be a simple "small is beautiful" endorsement. I have an old non-Christian acquaintance. He is a smart-aleck engineer from Harvard who used to chuckle and say, "Blessed are the meek for they are no trouble at all." I don't think we need Christendom to be a persistent impediment to evil and a prick to the pagan conscience. Disentangling this aspect of the missional church in connectedness from the apparatus of Christendom will, I believe, test us acutely.

Faithfulness and cultural intelligence are the twin goals of the next stage of this Gospel and Our Culture work. For now, we must give thanks that grace has brought us safe thus far and hope that grace will see us home. ■



ANNUAL GOCN CONSULTATION

Dates have been set for the next annual GOCN Consultation. It will be held on October 22-24, 1998, at Techny Towers Conference Center in the Chicago area. The themes for these annual consultations revolve among the three points of focused attention in the GOCN agenda: culture, gospel and church. The last two years we have addressed issues of culture ("postmodernity" in 1996) and church ("missional church" in 1997). This year we will give attention to our hearing of the gospel. The work currently getting under way in the "Hearing the Gospel Today" facet of the Transforming Congregations Towards Mission Project will give shape to the development of the theme. Further details will be announced in the June issue of the newsletter.

Discussing the Missional Church

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With apologies to Tom Jones, it is not unusual for denominational staff to meet to discuss issues. It is not unusual for pastors to gather for conversation. It is not unusual for people who work in parachurch organizations to talk about their mission. For representatives of all those groups to meet in a sustained way is. The occasion for this effort was the book *Missional Church*. Our purpose was to read and critique the prepublication copy of the book. Our work took us beyond that.

Our group was made up of local pastors (some with years of experience and some right out of seminary), a pastor from Brazil, staff from the various offices of our denomination's national office (theology and worship, evangelism, worldwide ministries), and representation from a denominational renewal organization. In addition, several of those in the group had prior experience in parachurch ministries whose focus was evangelism.

As far as critical response to the book is concerned, I'm not sure that we were as disciplined, helpful or timely as we should have been. As I've reviewed others' critiques, I realized that our responses were shared by others. (1) We were concerned that worship issues be more fully developed. (2) We thought the work on the church as alternative culture was provocative. We asked all the questions that Reformed folks ask of those in the Anabaptist tradition — they weren't called the Radical Reformers for nothing! Instead of speaking of non-conformity to the world, we preferred to speak of conformity to the gospel, as if that solved the problem of being 'in the

world, but not of the world.' It became clear that in the shifting church-culture environment, we are taking the Radical Reformation more seriously. (3) We were concerned that what was in this book could be made more accessible to those in the church who aren't as familiar with the assumptions, definitions and even vocabulary of the missional church conversation.

The original question we were asked to consider, 'How can this book be improved?', began to compete with an emerging and eventually parallel question, 'How does this book relate to my work?' Some of the (decidedly Presbyterian) ways in which we answered that question were as follows:

1. Many in the church think that the church has only two tasks for all of its members — education and worship. There is little understanding of the ends to which those tasks are directed. Mission is a program area for a few who go out to 'do something.' Understanding the mission of the church as the whole people of God sent to bear witness to the coming kingdom of God would help to bring cohesion and purpose to the tasks.

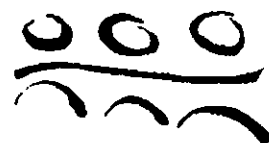
2. Theology is important in equipping us for understanding the missional church. In the Reformed tradition, we have too often thought of theology as the mastery of statements and concepts about God. Rather, it is about offering a vision about what God is doing in our midst. It's not so much about getting the words right as it is about living life under God.

3. The structures of churches are changing, no matter what. This discussion helped each of us shape or reshape our thinking as each of us seeks to articulate a vision for the

work we do in our part of the church. It's not just a matter of 'renewal' anymore. That implies revivifying what was past. If we see the church as representing the reign of God as community, servant and messenger, our view of and attachment to structures are altered.

It became very clear that our own denomination needs to be challenged again and again by the gospel. It is not a matter of getting it right and moving on with our work, getting further and further away from the center, as if the gospel of Jesus Christ was just the tap that launched us on a trajectory of our 'real' work. We need to hear the gospel again and again across the structures. It is true that the 'continuing conversion' of the church is needed.

The discussion was exciting and energizing, and like that famous pink bunny, we are still 'going and going.' We continue to meet on a regular basis discussing other works in missiology. But, we are not euphoric. This is a sobering thing to do. To be challenged by the gospel means that one must go to and through the cross. One of our group members told of a colleague who tried to transform his church along the lines articulated in *Missional Church*. He was fired. That, however, is not the worst-case scenario. The worst case is to throw one's lot in with the status quo, which doesn't exist. ■



NETWORKINGS

■ The teams working on various facets of the **Transforming Congregations Towards Mission Project** have been confirmed and their work is beginning. The teams include the following:

Hearing the Gospel Today: Charles West, Coordinator, Princeton, NJ; Jonathan Bonk, New Haven, CT; Jim Brownson, Holland, MI; Emmanuel Clapsis, Westwood, MA; Inagrace Dietterich, Chicago, IL; Christopher Duraisingh, Cambridge, MA; Barry Harvey, Waco, TX; Stacey Johnson, Austin, TX; Bill McConville, Loudonville, NY; Mary Motte, North Providence, RI.

Developing Congregational Models: Wally Hobbs, Coordinator, Thiensville, WI; Lois Barrett, Newton, KS; Dale Ziemer, Chicago, IL; Darrell Guder, Decatur, GA; Penny Marler, Birmingham, AL; Linford Stutzman, Harrisonburg, VA; Gail Neal, Overland Park, KS; Jeff Van Kooten, Denver, CO.

Engaging Systems Implications: Alan Roxburgh, Coordinator, West Vancouver, BC; Patrick Kiefert, St. Paul, MN; Duncan McIntosh, Audubon, PA; Barbara Miller, Denton, TX; Mike Regele, Costa Mesa, CA; Don Troost, Schenectady, NY; Craig Van Gelder, Grand Rapids, MI; David Lowes Watson, Nashville, TN.

Producing Educational Resources: Junior McGarrahan, Coordinator, Louisville, KY; Laurie Baron, Holland, MI; Judy Bos, Holland, MI; Paul Dietterich, Chicago, IL; Charles Long, Wyoming, OH; Sid McCollum, Clinton, MS.

In Search of the Missional Church

We Need Your Help!!!

GOCN's research team, "Developing Congregational Models," is charged with the responsibility to locate various congregations across North America which reflect the character of the "missional church" as that is articulated in the book *Missional Church*. The team will select 12-15 such churches that exhibit some particular quality or qualities of that vision and then will visit them to explore their histories. The fruit of their research will be reported in a published volume that shows what "missional churches" look like and how they got that way. If you know (or simply know about) any such fellowships, please tell us. Send us information about where they are, what impresses you about them, what aspect or aspects of the missional church vision they exhibit, whom we may contact, their address and phone numbers, etc. Get in touch with either Judy Bos in the GOCN office, or with me, Wally Hobbs, Models Team Leader, at 623 Lake Bluff Road, Thiensville, WI 53092-1286, phone 414-512-0308, fax 414-512-1828, e-mail <wchobbs@acsu.buffalo.edu>.



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