

Developing a Missional Approach to Ministry

(or, What will we do THIS year?)

What vision will guide us?¹

There are two fundamentally different perceptions of the nature and mission of the church and the correspondingly different approaches to ministry development: (1) what the world allows and expects of the church within modern secular society, and (2) the biblical vision of the church as the new people of God. As leaders of your church responsible for developing the congregation's ministry, you will find yourselves pulled by the tension between these two perspectives. Church transformation is about enabling new ways of thinking, understanding and behaving to occur in the church. In preparing for your task of cultivating your church to become more faithful to its calling, it will be helpful to examine the expectations, resistances, and forces that define a tension between competing perceptions of the mission of the church and resulting approaches to ministry development.

The World's Vision.

Western society is secular. That is, a distinction is made between the private realm of religious experience (the "sacred") and the public realm of societal reality (the "secular"). Religion is one aspect of human life alongside other aspects: economic, political, social. Religion is assumed to be individual, subjective, and based in personal opinion, while the other aspects of life are assumed to be corporate, objective, and based in publicly demonstrated facts. "Real" life lived in the "real" world is separate and

¹ Dietterich, Inagrace T., "The World's Vision vs. God's Vision," *Center Letter*, Chicago: Center for Parish Development, 1993, Volume 23, Number 3.

distinct from religious experience. This secular perspective relegates religion--and thus the church--to the "sublime" of the private and subjective, where it "is to be protected and treasured, although it causes no positively definable effects within the objective factual world."² In modern society, religion has been positioned on the margins as the private belief, piety, or morality of the individual. Or, to the extent that it is assumed that religion is good for all individuals, it functions as a "civil religion" to provide the moral standards and motivation for the whole of society.

The role of ministry development within the church from this viewpoint is to determine the needs of individuals and to respond accordingly--without, of course, meddling in the real world of economics or politics. Since the mission of the church is defined in terms of the demands of the "market," the church is therefore to utilize market research to determine the needs, desires, and life-styles of its designated target populations. The programs and services to be offered by the church are then tailored to accommodate this population. If the "baby-boomers" want a church which will complement yet not challenge their chosen life-style, then the church must reshape its worship, language, and expectations of commitment. "Training of Christians on cross-bearing, sacrifice, and service, calling sinners to repentance, these are out of place."³ The church becomes not vision-led by God's redemptive mission revealed in Jesus Christ, but market-driven by the perceived hurts and hopes of the world. "Unable to preach Christ and him crucified, we preach humanity and it improved."⁴ The ministry of the church is developed "on the basis of 'supply-side' ecclesiology, which begins by asking what needs exist in the wider culture and how we can meet those needs."⁵

God's Vision for the Church.

It is common to hear people speak of the mission of the church as "meeting people's needs." It is not, however, our idea to be the church; it is God who calls the church into being. It would be more appropriate to speak of the purpose of the church as "meeting God's needs." This challenges us to look to scripture and to our religious heritage to understand more fully the nature of that call.

² John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 106.

³ From a bulletin put out by the Protestant Council of New York City in the 1950s, giving advice to its radio speakers, which is still representative of the approach of too many churches who are attempting to "grow." Quoted in *New Life in the Church* by Robert A. Raines (Harper & Brothers, 1961), p. 73.

⁴ William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Eerdmans, 1992), p. 9.

⁵ D. Stephen Long, *Living the Discipline: United Methodist Theological Reflection on War, Civilization, and Holiness* (Eerdmans, 1992), p. 11.

Scripture proclaims a radically different understanding of the church: "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation," (1 Peter 2:9, NRSV). In a democratic society that stresses equality and inclusion, this is shocking and threatening language. It appears to imply an inappropriate exclusiveness that can lead to an arrogant elitism. After all, who are we to call ourselves "chosen"?

Yet this is exactly the point. Christian identity is not achieved but received: "Once you were no people, but now you are God's people" (1 Peter 2:10). Based not in good will or good deeds, but in the active receiving of God's undeserved love and mercy, this identity is one of witness and service rather than of privilege and self-interest. As "God's own people," Christians have a vital mission: "to proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (vs. 9).

The church is the "ecclesia" of God: a people called forth to fulfill a divine purpose: to witness to God's love and mercy for all humanity. Christian community is not a loose collection of individuals who gather occasionally to meet their self-determined needs. Transformed by baptism and faith into God's new people, the church is a chosen, called, and gifted community of ministry.

Within this perspective, Christianity is not an idea or an ideal or even an experience, but a people: a witnessing and serving community. Christians are a people who live a distinctive life-style, which expresses distinctive beliefs in distinctive language through distinctive practices to fulfill a distinctive mission. Here, ministry development has to do with the development--the cultivation--of a particular and even "peculiar" community. The issue is reframed from "How do we meet individual needs?" to "How do we become the kind of community we are called to become?" The focus is now upon the cultivation--the concrete and practical formation--of a people called and empowered by God to fulfill God's purposes. What is at stake is "the creation of a distinct community with its own set of values and its coherent way of incarnating them."⁶

As the community of the baptized, Christians are called to "put on the garments that suit God's chosen people, his own, his beloved: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience (Col. 3:12, NEB)." While in the Christian way of life there is joy and praise, comfort and

⁶ John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution* (Herald Press, 1977), p. 28.

affirmation, freedom and adventure, the Christian way of life is also one of sacrifice and service, of humility and rejection, of commitment and discipline.

The ministry--the programs and services--of the early church were not determined according to a survey, on the basis of the power of special interest groups, in response to the burning social issue of the moment, or according to the desires of the current leadership. The ministry of the church was determined by what it took to cultivate--to build up--the new people of God, to contribute to the concrete and practical formation of the apostolic community of the Spirit.

The description of the ongoing life of the baptized and forgiven community in Acts suggests the essential elements of the church's ministry in any time and place: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (2:42). Most contemporary churches include these elements. Contemporary congregations provide educational activities, gathering for fellowship, corporate worship, and communal prayer. Yet without a strong and shared sense of mission, a recognition and affirmation of the overarching purpose of its ministry, the church will lose its way and begin to accommodate itself to the cultural climate.

The various programs and services offered by the church are intended to provide the content, motivation, direction, and support for the mission of the church. Since the mission of the church is dependent upon the ongoing inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit -- the living God who is creatively and redemptively active in the world -- it must be open and responsive to the challenges and opportunities of changing circumstances.

Yet this responsiveness is always to be determined by a continuing exploration of the distinctive identity and purpose of the church as the community called to witness to God's mighty work in Jesus Christ. Thus ministry development is not an operational procedure -- a way to fill up the calendar or attract new members -- but a strategic endeavor which has profound and long-term implications. Only as the programs and services of the church draw the community into the creative purpose, redemptive activity, and transformative presence of God will they have validity, integrity, or relevance. In practice, this underscores the need to discern God's vision and to ground the work of ministry development in that vision. Intentional and communal prayer, study, and discernment are key practices to cultivate within the congregation, thus tilling the soil for rich and fruitful ministry development that move the congregation toward that vision.

