

An Outgoing Missional Church Starts with . . . Going in First!

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The church I pastored was located in an urban, lower class area and its neighbours were predominately immigrants. Few members of the congregation lived in the neighbourhood with most resided in surrounding middle class suburbs. Even I drove 20 minutes to get to the church. We chose this church building, some years ago, simply because we were outgrowing our previous building. Location was of little importance as long as it was big enough. However, some years later, the desire of the congregation became more “missional.” We wanted to reach out to the neighbourhood! We wanted to be there for the immigrants, the unemployed, the single moms, the addicts. One day a church member, we will call her Ruth, asked a profound question to many in the congregation: “How can we reach out to those outside the church if we can’t even handle some ‘out of the box’ members within our midst?” I immediately realised Ruth was right. We found it hard to deal with a young couple who desired to wave banners in the service to glorify God. We felt uncomfortable watching a group of women dancing before the Lord. We were puzzled by how to respond to a trans-gender in our midst: was he (or she?) living in sin? Could she (or he?) become an official member of the church and be on committees or even on the church board? How could the congregation handle even harder “missional” challenges if we could not be united in the current internal issues?

Images of the church

A way to address the dilemma mentioned above is defining how we see the church. One approach for looking at the church is through the lens of models or metaphors.¹ Avery Dulles, for example, distinguishes between institutional and community church models and he rightfully argues that each of these models has strengths and weaknesses. For that reason he tries to “harmonise the models in such a way that their differences become complementary rather than mutually repugnant.”² Donald Messer acknowledges how the use of models, images, or metaphors of the church “at their best can only be suggestive; pushed to an extreme they can become distorted, ridiculous, and useless. Images, however, can move us beyond sterile concepts, inflaming our imaginations and helping us to perceive realities that

¹ See, for example, Avery R. Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Image Classics, 2002); Darren Cronshaw, *Credible Witness: Companions, Prophets, Hosts and Other Australian Mission Models* (Springvale: Urban Neighbours of Hope, 2006); Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books; repr., 2002); Donald E. Messer, *Contemporary Images of Christian Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

² Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 187.

cannot be measured or objectified easily.”³ In his book *A Conspiracy of Goodness*, Messer focuses on missional metaphors in which mission is simply defined as the vocation of the entire community of faith to be sent out and share the gospel message.⁴ In the context of my article it is worth looking at his missional metaphor of a congregation as a “Community of Fence Movers.”⁵ Messer defines fence movers as persons who see broader visions beyond given boundaries. In the community of fence movers, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).⁶ Messer states that “fence movers dare to dream of more inclusive communities in terms of gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, and sexual orientation. These boundary crossers claim as their mission of ministry to ensure inclusiveness by overcoming the division, fears, and hatreds that separate and alienate God’s family.”⁷ The congregation that I presented in the introduction dreamed about being fence movers or, more appropriately, being wall movers. The church members wanted to include those outside the church walls to make them feel part of those inside the building. But, as Ruth questioned, were they really ready for this move having difficulties including the broad variety of people who were already inside the walls?

The pluriformity of a congregation

From the perspective of an outsider, a group of congregants may appear to be a homogenous assembly of people. They are part of the same denomination, they sing the same songs, read the same Bible, and receive the same message on Sunday mornings. Dan Boone describes a stereotype of such a church and he refers to it as the “Final Word Church” having “the final word on all doctrinal, ethical, social, and political issues. All you have to do is sign the dotted line of the membership covenant, and they will give you your position on everything.”⁸ At the other end of the spectrum Boone positions the “Maturing Church.” This type of church is willing to wrestle with the tough issues. In this type of church

³ Donald E. Messer, *A Conspiracy of Goodness: Contemporary Images of Christian Mission* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 78.

⁴ Messer, *Conspiracy of Goodness*, 16.

⁵ Messer, *Conspiracy of Goodness*, 127-44. The name of this metaphor is derived from an event that took place in a Polish village during the First World War. A non Roman Catholic relief worker died in the village and was buried in a grave outside the Roman Catholic cemetery because canonical law forbade burying anyone not of that confession in consecrated ground. Overnight, villagers had moved the fence of the cemetery so that it now included the grave.

⁶ Messer, *Conspiracy of Goodness*, 129.

⁷ Messer, *Conspiracy of Goodness*, 131-32.

⁸ Dan Boone, *A Charitable Discourse: Talking about the things that divide us* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2010), 162-63.

[y]ou will grow accustomed to hearing an issue discussed by Christians with different perspectives. You will quickly discover that good people can read the same Bible and reach different conclusions. You will be formed as a maturing follower of Jesus in a changing world. Your worldview will continue to develop as you study Scripture and live in a vibrant community.... And you will sit on the same pew with people who do not think like you think but who could not be more brother or sister, because your unity is rooted in the redeeming love that binds you together in Christ.⁹

Ideally, people with different opinions will accept different views and still be able to see one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. According to Edward Collins Vacek, such a church should not only *accept* a great diversity within itself, but as an expression of love it should also *foster* that diversity. The two extremes that kill diversity are “conformism” on the one hand and “schisms” on the other, both considered by Vacek to be failures of love: “If genuine participation is present, there will be unity in difference between Christ and his Church and between the Church and its members.”¹⁰

The reality of church life is that group dynamics can be rather tense at times, and my introductory example is just one illustration. Research shows that formal or informal groups within a church can have a greater love for those within the group than for those outside the group. Several scholars refer to this phenomenon as in-group love.¹¹ In-group exclusivism is also referred to as cliquishness or network saturation.¹² Brian Gleeson comments on this weakness and argues that “[M]embers of close communities may feel at home only among themselves and regard others as outsiders and intruders.”¹³ Finally, Robert Welsh and Michelle Owaka show that boundaries between groups are often based upon arbitrary characteristics, such as physical appearance, language, religion, and social status. These

⁹ Boone, *Charitable Discourse*. The third type of church is described by Boone as the “Safe Church.” This type will have “a safe pastor who will find the middle of the road and stay in it. You will not have any of your thoughts challenged. You will hear from the pulpit what you already think.”

¹⁰ Edward Collins Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine: the Heart of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 85-86.

¹¹ Thomas Jay Oord, *Defining Love: A Philosophical, Scientific, and Theological Engagement* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), 60.

¹² Daniel V.A. Olson, “Church Friendships: Boon or Barrier to Church Growth?,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28, no. 4 (1989): 442-46.

¹³ Brian Gleeson, “Images, Understandings, and Models of the Church in History: An Update,” *Australian E-Journal of Theology* 12, no. 1 (2008), 1-34, http://aejt.com.au/2008/issue_12/?article=107526, accessed 04/04/2013. Philosopher Charles Taylor even states: ‘Sometimes a church community becomes a tribe . . . and treat outsiders as Jews treated Samaritans.’ See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 739.

judgements can easily lead to faulty perceptions, attributions, and malevolent behaviour.¹⁴ Based upon these research data, the conclusion needs again to be that Ruth had a correct perception of reality: a congregation can be too internally divided to include or handle more diversity than it already has. Despite the desire to be missional, parochialism is a serious hindrance to mission; it encumbers the church's ability to be fence movers or wall movers.

How to become more inclusive?

Several scholars suggest solutions to in-group exclusivism. Welsh and Owaka state that "if we strive to love and to live as Christ did, there cannot be boundaries between . . . 'us' and 'them'."¹⁵ The authors suggest that we need to cross boundaries and find ways to intentionally deconstruct stereotypes, to create solidarity through awareness and to dialogue about doctrine.¹⁶ Vacek suggests the solution to in-group exclusivism is a right self-identity and a right self-worth, derived from God's love. He writes:

[S]alvation is not merely individual. God saves Israel, the Church, the world. That is, God can and does love "corporate persons." The universal Church or a local church can feel blessed and uplifted by God's love. God is felt to be with them as a community. The members of the group can accept that they live not simply in themselves nor simply in their relations to other groups. Rather, as a group they live in relation to God. *Then the group too no longer needs to be preoccupied with itself, with "turf-questions." It can be moved beyond its own tendencies to exclusivism or self-preserving structural rigidity.* It can even dare to lose its life for the sake of others. Accepting that we are beloved daughters and sons of God brings freedom. In allowing ourselves to feel loved and therefore affirmed by God, we no longer have to anxiously protect ourselves against rejection.¹⁷

Messer seems to agree with these authors that a right self-identity of being the beloved daughters and sons of God opens the way for dialogue. He states: "[w]ith hearts enlarged with love, communities of fence movers do not fear dialogue with those who differ from themselves."¹⁸

¹⁴ Robert K. Welsh and Michelle Owaka, "Deideologizing Dominance: Power and Privilege as Impediments to Godly Love," in *Godly Love: Impediments and Possibilities*, ed. Matthew T. Lee and Amos Yong (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012), 123.

¹⁵ Welsh and Owaka, "Deideologizing Dominance," 123. For a similar conclusion how Godly love can flourish when spiritual experience transcends or transforms cultural boundaries in benevolent ways (such as increasing racial and gender equality), see Kimberly Ervin Alexander and James P. Bowers, "Race and Gender Equality in a Classical Pentecostal Denomination," in *Godly Love: Impediments and Possibilities*, ed. Matthew T. Lee and Amos Yong (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012), 131-51.

¹⁶ Welsh and Owaka, "Deideologizing Dominance," 123-26.

¹⁷ Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine*, 129. Emphasis mine.

¹⁸ Messer, *Conspiracy of Goodness*, 139.

Therefore, my argument in this article is that before a church community engages in a missional dialogue with those outside the church walls, a dialogue needs to take place within the church walls. For at least two reasons this conversation with one another is beneficial. First, as Boone has argued, church members will get used to the idea that the person sitting next to them in the pews serves the same God but might hold differing beliefs about certain issues. From a missional perspective, a second advantage is that these encounters function as a safe practise for the dialogues that will hopefully take place with those who come in once the church walls have been moved. These dialogues, obviously, need to revolve around the theme of being a missional church: What are the core beliefs to which we need to hold? What does it mean to be inclusive? What is our understanding of being a missional church? What (and who!) can we expect? What do we hope to achieve? This process of dialogue is similar to Jesus' saying in Luke 14:28 that anyone who wants to build a tower needs first to sit down and estimate the cost. In line with Jesus' metaphor, I offer three suggestions for congregational leaders to begin laying a missional foundation before moving the church walls.

Foundational building blocks for a missional congregation

The first building block that needs to be in place is a trustworthy leadership team. Is the leadership transparent in decision-making processes? Is the leadership team transparent in acknowledging its weaknesses and failures and are there any hidden agendas? Does the leadership team operate in unity and demonstrate a desire to serve God? Trust can be considered the most important virtue in ministry, not only trust in God but also in one another. At the same time, trust in ministry can be more complicated than trust in God.¹⁹ One complicating factor is that trust comes slowly but can disappear rapidly, and re-establishing trust will take time and effort.²⁰

The second building block for congregational leaders is intentional inclusivity in its decision-making processes. The desire to be a missional church not only requires commitment of the leadership team but of lay members as well. Because of group dynamics and parochialism there will be a broad variety of opinions on how to be a missional church or whether to be one at all. Boone ties together the two building blocks of being trustworthy and being inclusive as he discusses generational trust. In his paraphrase, the older church generation is saying to the younger one: "We want to trust you, but we'll need some assurance that you are open to

¹⁹ Martin E. Marty, "Trust as The Virtue for Ministry," *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 32, no. 1 (2012): 13.

²⁰ Joop Koppenjan and Erik-Hans Klijn, *Managing Uncertainties in Networks: a Network Approach to Problem Solving and Decision Making* (London: Routledge, 2004), 232.

hear our wisdom – even if you decide to do it your way.”²¹ This paraphrase is applicable to church leadership as well. Although the church board, or group of elders, is appointed to make decisions, that doesn’t mean they should be deaf to the wisdom of others. Believing communities are responsible for the spiritual health of the whole community. There should be an interdependence of clergy and laity, in listening and learning from one another.²²

It will be very time consuming and for the leadership team to include different opinions and truly foster a broad variety of views and all groups involved must be aware of this as they move forward. It involves initiating dialogues within different settings in the congregation, asking many questions, exposing yourself, and making yourself vulnerable to criticism. But the reward of this process is clarity about the spectrum of different positions. Ideally, the building of trust and the intentional inclusion of different voices will lead towards a mutual commitment of clergy and laity on how to be a missional church.

The third and final foundational building block for church leaders is to set parameters and define clearly what it is to be a missional church and how to bear responsibility for its consequences. As stated before, church leaders are not just facilitators. Although the facilitating function of a pastor (including the church board) has a biblical base, the calling of ministers is also to “project a vision, to offer directions, and to exercise authority as well as to participate as partners in congregational life.”²³ If trust in the leadership team is in place, if prayer and church-wide dialogues revealed commitment to being a missional church, then the final step in the process is that the church board takes the responsibility for moving the church walls.

Conclusion

Being a missional church requires doing homework, requires calculating the costs. It requires acknowledging that a congregation is not united in opinions about doctrine, life styles, and membership issues. Being a missional church also requires a church- wide commitment to adopting a missional philosophy of being wall-movers. The church leadership team (or church board) has an important responsibility in this process. Not only does the team need to demonstrate that within the team it is possible to operate in unity despite diverging opinions. It also needs to invite the congregation to express thoughts and fears about being a missional and inclusive church. It needs to initiate a dialogue creating an awareness of the consequences involved with being a missional church. The outcome of such an introspective

²¹ Boone, *Charitable Discourse*, 157.

²² André Munzinger, *Discerning the Spirits: Theological and Ethical Hermeneutics in Paul*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 62.

²³ Messer, *Contemporary Images*, 98-99.

mission, which should go hand in hand with prayer, is to show whether or not the congregation is ready for its outgoing mission. Maybe the conclusion needs to be that before moving the church walls the congregation needs to learn how to accept and love those who are already within the walls.