

# TAKE TIME TO BE HOLY: CULTIVATING THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

by Inagrace T. Dietterich and Dale A. Ziemer<sup>1</sup>

We have been asked to explore current trends in the church in light of the emerging discussion of what it means to cultivate the missional church. To begin the discussion we would like to draw your imagination to the journey of Jesus as he is invited into the home of "a woman named Martha."

*Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'* (Luke 10:38-42)

With whom do you identify in this episode? With Martha who is actively engaged in creating a comfortable and hospitable environment for Jesus, or with Mary who disengages herself from the household tasks, sits down, and listens to what Jesus has to say? Most of us, as active and concerned church people, will almost certainly identify with Martha. We may even feel a bit resentful about Jesus' response to her request for help. Like Martha, we are committed, involved, responsible, and very, very busy people. While some of us may have regular times for quiet devotion, it is very difficult for most of us to take time out, to slow down, step back, and listen--even to our spouses.

We live in a world that honors activity rather than quietness, production rather than contemplation, Martha rather than Mary. But Luke reminds us of a different path. Calling us to pause in the midst of the hectic tasks of life and ministry, asking us to detach ourselves from the many demands of job and family, Luke declares that taking the time to sit at the Lord's feet is "the better part."

At a time when many observers are describing the relationship of the church to the surrounding culture in terms of "post" (post-Christendom, post-establishment, post-Constantinianism), the church is challenged to clarify its identity and vision. From local church to denomination, a great deal of time, energy, and money is being expended to try and help congregations become more relevant and

accessible, to make their message and services more attractive and understandable. But perhaps the most scarce commodity of all is time, adequate time for attentive conversation and thoughtful reflection. Everyone connected with the church is very busy, from high school youth to seminary professors (and perhaps pre-schoolers as well!). There are many important responsibilities to be fulfilled, people to be seen, programs to be developed, resources to be produced, meetings to be attended, planning to be done.

Yet it may well be that with all the strategies of renewal and all the rhetoric of change, church people are being distracted from their primary purpose as God's people. At the heart of all the hustle and bustle there is increasingly the awareness of an emptiness, a lack of substance, a missing core. Taking the time to be holy entails intentionally listening to God. Discovering the identity and vision for the church of the future means discovering whose we are, who we are, and what we are to be about as communities of faith.

## Reading the Signs of the Times

The ability to read and interpret the signs of the times is a core competency required of congregations as they move into the twenty-first century. When asked to describe the signs of the times most church leaders and members of mainline denominations point to the obvious: the thirty-year unrelenting pattern of church membership loss, financial shortfalls, deteriorating buildings, and loss of societal influence. They recognize the potential for rapid decline in even the most prosperous and strongest of congregations. Most see that the days of effortless dominance by a handful of mainline Protestant denominations is over.

It is at this point that many in the church go astray. Seeing only these factors, and failing to put them into a critical and theological perspective, they are tempted to look for quick solutions to the membership, financial, and other immediate challenges confronting them. Many observable trends today reflect this desire for a neat and ready made answer. For example, there are trends of adopting marketing techniques designed to package the church's "product" in a more attractive manner, seeking to make connections with the secular "non-church" mindset. There are trends of attempting to imitate the success of a particular church model, such as suburban mega-churches,

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<sup>1</sup> Inagrace T. Dietterich is the Director for Theological Research and Dale A. Ziemer is a Senior Consultant with the Center for Parish Development, Chicago, IL. This essay first appeared in the Fall issue of *Reformed Review*, published by Western Theological Seminary, Holland, Michigan.

in order to attract more members. There are trends of trying to revitalize congregations by forming multiple small groups, seeking to provide more options to meet people's personal and spiritual needs. There are trends of embracing "alternative worship" services, seeking to be more relevant and creative. And there are trends of redrawing the organizational chart, downsizing, and seeking to become more efficient.

What these trends have in common is that the image driving most--if not all--of them is the so-called golden age of the 1950s, a time when all you had to do was open the doors and people flocked into the church. And all of them are about "more" of the same, attempting to become more successful by simply trying harder and working smarter. Too many church leaders fail to see the institutional challenges as symptoms of a much larger panorama of cultural change. Therefore they also miss the opportunity to enable the church to rediscover, reinterpret, and revision its life and ministry within a changing cultural context--to live into a missional identity and vision.

Whether we recognize it or not, change--destabilizing change--is the primary fact of life for congregations today, and it will continue to be the primary factor into the future. The once seemingly calm and tranquil environment in which North American churches functioned has become increasingly uncertain and turbulent. Swirling gusts of cultural, political, technological, and economic changes are sweeping across the religious landscape. The familiar understandings and the comfortable postures of the past will be insufficient for faithful and effective ministry within tomorrow's world. Whether we like it or not, "Mainstream Protestants are living through a significant re-forming, reshaping, and redefinition of their churches."<sup>1</sup> Within this context, congregations are challenged to read the signs of the times, to sit at the Lord's feet, to take the time to be open to the power and the promise of God's transforming presence.

As the church faces the facts of change it also faces significant obstacles, not the least of which is the always present trend of resistance to innovation. Churches today at all levels (local, regional, and national) are characterized by complex organizational structures, policies, and procedures constructed in and for another age. In other words, while the cultural hegemony of mainstream Protestantism may have ended, the old patterns, attitudes, and ways of believing and behaving continue. Churches are organized and function in a manner that guarantee that the policies and practices that may have worked in the past will simply continue into the future. These systems and structures are inadequate for the challenges of the current situation because they resist innovation and reinforce the status quo. Failing to read the signs of the times, too busy for significant theological reflection, and thus resistant to

significant change, these church bodies are set up for failure--for unfaithfulness to their divine calling.

Through our research and consulting, teaching and writing, we at the Center for Parish Development, in partnership with a variety of church bodies, are identifying and nurturing alternative trends. These trends reflect the attempt to lay foundation stones for a more intentional identity and vision as missional churches. They include processes of (1) envisioning a dynamic and faithful future, (2) reconceiving theology as the work of the people, and (3) cultivating a common mind within the community of faith. We will illustrate how congregations are engaging in these processes. These illustrations are not so much the result of formal research, or a full case study, as they are gleanings from church leaders<sup>2</sup> who are involved in deliberate efforts to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit and thus to be transformed as a body of people participating in God's mission.

*Pause to reflect together and discuss what you have read so far, using these questions:*

1. What trends can you observe in churches today?
2. What do these trends have in common with each other?

## **Envisioning A Dynamic and Faithful Future**

Being faithful to the living God who is actively present in changing historical situations--"Behold, I am doing a new thing" (Isa. 43:19)--calls the church to be adventuresome and open to profound change. Those church bodies who are seeking "to sing to the Lord a new song" (Isa. 42:10), are learning new ways to put the questions, developing new frameworks for interpreting them, and crafting new proposals for shaping the church's life, worship, and ministry. Embracing change as an opportunity for greater faithfulness, they are coming to view the current challenges not as decline but as transition, as an opportunity to re-vision and participate anew in God's creative and redemptive mission for all humanity--to be transformed.

*People are beginning to imagine about their church, 'What if we were really chosen by God?'*

*What I'm seeing now at our church is definitely a glimmer. We are beginning to understand that it is*

*our life together that is a representation of something important. Our life together is the measure, our witness. This is really something that people are thinking about.*

*The conversation is beginning to move away from 'bucks and butts' to 'how can we become more faithful?'*

The experience of these churches is radical--it goes to the very roots. One author describes the depth and complexity of such a change process: "The Scriptures refer to what we are calling transformation as conversion, being born again, the year of release or jubilee, and from being 'no people' to 'God's people.' Transformation means fundamental changes in perspective, behavior, relationships, and structures that together lead toward wholeness, justice, and reconciliation."<sup>3</sup> Church transformation--profound systemic and strategic change--means moving beyond rigid adherence to the past, to the envisioning of a responsive, dynamic, and creative future.

*I used to think that we entered this transformation process to help our church become a better vendor, to keep our members happy. Now we are asking some different questions as we reflect on the Bible and our religious heritage to discern God's vision for the future.*

Congregations engaged in the transforming process of envisioning are becoming intentional learning communities actively engaged in discerning God's vision for their future. Both to enable this process and as a result of the process, the membership of the church becomes more theologically informed, focused, and involved, and the leadership becomes more reflective, flexible, and responsive. As they begin to learn corporately and collaboratively, they begin to appreciate the importance of setting aside the time to listen, to dream, to share, to test, to learn from one another. And their goal becomes not one of quick solutions or quick agreement, but of discovering an enriched common vision through the sharing and testing of personal visions.

*A major learning for us has been how much time actually is involved in discerning God's call as a congregation.*

*We are not seeking an artificial conformity, but the rich texture which can arise from the bringing together of our personal visions into a coherent and dynamic whole.*

Many local churches and other church bodies are currently involved in varied processes of visioning and/or discernment. This is a positive trend. But in order for it to become more than just another fad (like the trend of

writing mission statements a few years ago), it must involve more than the writing of a vision statement to be adopted by the church council and displayed on the church bulletin. Communal processes of envisioning truly become the discernment of God's saving purpose when they are open to and filled with the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit within the shared prayer, reflection, dreams, and insights of the community of faith. Thus churches are engaging the whole congregation in communal processes of study and interpretation of the biblical witness to God's redemptive activity in the world. They have come to see that authentic vision comes not from individual inspiration or majority vote, but from the renewal or conversion of the corporate mind, heart, and will. This trend has involved learning new behaviors and skills.

*We have begun to set aside comfortable ways of being 'the church,' and to think in new ways by getting in touch with our spiritual roots. We're not just exchanging our opinions, or examining our individual piety, but discovering who God is calling us to be as the church.*

*God has a vision for this congregation. But in order to dream God's dreams and see God's vision for us, we need imaginations that are full of the biblical images. The ways of the business world, the jingoos of ads and the plots of TV sit-coms crowd out the Psalms and Master's plan for the Creation. Together we will refresh our biblical imaginations and discern God's vision for us. It still feels like 'driver's training.' We are re-learning skills we need to be the missionary church in these next 100 years: claiming our heritage, studying our culture, evaluating our behavior, and letting the Word and Spirit lead us.*

The trend of envisioning together a dynamic and faithful future involves developing the capacity to envision (to see) the world as God sees the world, to think and relate to one another in new ways, and to act in ways that are based upon this new way of seeing.

*We came at strategic planning out of God's call to us to be the body of Christ. We have been guided by Romans 12:2: 'Do not be conformed to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...'* The greatest value to us has been the change process itself with its many concentric circles of being immersed in Scripture and theology, of training, of listening, of reflecting, of discerning the many gifts of people, of challenging ourselves. We didn't start with structure, although we now have designed a new conference structure. We are becoming vision-led, intentionally conciliar, and connectional.

Use this question to reflect together:

This section introduced you to the idea of "envisioning." What is involved when a church engages in envisioning?

## Theology as the Work of the People

Closely linked with the trend of envisioning is the trend of once again enabling theology to be the work of the people. This involves undoing the culturally established pattern of mainline Protestantism which presupposed a religion-culture synthesis. Since we were a "Christian nation," the intertwining of goals, commitments, and destiny of church and society was simply taken for granted. And as long as American culture was believed to be permeated by Christian ideals and behavior patterns, there was no need for the person-in-the-pew to reflect upon the distinctive identity and vision of Christianity. But, since the church's socio-cultural context is no long that of a "Christian nation," the doing of theology is no longer a vocational option for a selected minority. In the process of rediscovering a missional identity and vision congregations are recognizing that the entire community is called to be knowledgeable and articulate about its faith.

*Rockaway Church is learning to drive in a society where so many "rules of the road" have changed. We are learning how to **think as a congregation** about the unique challenges and opportunities we face. It is hard work to think about our faith. Theologian Douglas John Hall, comments, 'Whenever it becomes evident that Christian discipleship now entails new depth of thought--that a people pursuing 'happiness' instinctively avoids!--there is an exodus from the churches. Some of those who leave the thinking churches make their way to other 'sanctuaries' where thought is assuaged at once with ready-made answers, or lulled by old familiar tunes.' The Reformers in our heritage envisioned a disciple community in which all members, not only the clergy and the theologians, wrestled with the meaning of what they believed. You are doing that. Rejoice!*

These churches have discovered that in our secular and/or religiously plural society, it can no longer be assumed that the images, practices, and vocabulary of Christianity will come naturally, that they will automatically make sense to the average person. In such a world the intentional and disciplined thinking of the faith--theology--is essential in order to shape, equip, and empower missional communities. In other words, churches

living into a missional identity are saying "goodbye" to Christianity as good *common sense*, available to all without reflection, training, or change in attitude and lifestyle. And they are saying "hello" to theology as the work of the people, affirming that all Christians are to be engaged in the persistent and consistent exploration of the *uncommon sense* of Christianity.

*Pastors are questioning all of their working assumptions, they are trying to distinguish between what is Christendom thinking and what is not. Church leaders are starting to have frank discussions about the church's past--what it was and what it wasn't.*

*There is ferment, the foundations are being shaken. We are meeting together and are 'peeling the layers off the onion,' getting deeper into identifying working assumptions and working theology, discovering what we really believe and how we practice that.*

When the church is preoccupied with the effort to attract new members, or the meeting of the culturally defined needs of existing church members, it is all too easy to forget that the root meaning of "disciple" is *discere*, to learn. The *uncommon sense* of discipleship does not come naturally or easily, it must be learned within an ongoing process of formation. Becoming a disciple community means becoming a learning community which is being trained, educated, instructed in the new way of life made possible by the events of Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost. Embracing a missional identity and vision involves the active and disciplined thinking of the faith, which provides the motivation and direction for the church's ministry within the world. "Discipleship is submission to the discipline of understanding, without which the discipline of obedience-in-act lacks foundation and rationale."<sup>4</sup>

*We're involved in lots of theological reading and study--it's now an ongoing thing in this congregation. Thinking the faith has been important to us. We have seeds of an astute learning congregation. There is definitely more of a servant attitude as a result of The Beatitudes Bible study in which a sizable percentage of our congregation was involved. There's a change in perception about what we're after as a church. This actually could be quite a major shift. People are looking at church in a different way.*

The typical approach to "learning" assumes an autonomous individual engaged in a self-directed search for knowledge and/or technical skills. The New Testament presents a different approach. The learning of the disciple

community involves a communal process of conversion and witness guided by the enlightening and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 16:13). Discovering a missional identity and vision involves the expectation of and openness to the Spirit at work in, with, and through the disciplined thinking of the faith.

It is important to keep in mind that when the controls are lifted, when all members of the community are invited to participate, it is inevitable that there will be tension, struggle, and conflict. As congregations wrestle with important ideas and controversial issues, frustration, hostility, and even anger often emerge. A significant aspect of learning to be a disciple community is the demonstration of how to use conflict constructively among a body of unique, gifted, and dissimilar people.

*I am learning as a pastor that to help people move out of Christendom is a very redundant process--it tends to be two steps forward and three back. It involves resistance and people becoming entrenched. Or they kind of know Christendom isn't going to work but are not sure about the future. They are waffling on the fence.*

*Engaging in significant discussion about our faith and commitment involves a lot of frustration at first, an unbelievable amount of frustration.*

*Older long-time members are becoming open to new experiences, but also report that they are scared. There is lots of anxiety expressed about where this is going.*

*At Six Mile Run Church we discovered that the generations (those over 55 years and those under) have to talk and learn to understand each other. We now have every-other Sunday gatherings of people of any age coming together to dialogue, to understand one another's needs, values, and visions.*

Yet in the midst of the diversity and the conflict, the work of theology also involves the joy of discovery. Trusting the promises and following the leading of the Holy Spirit, congregations are discovering the courage to risk the unknown, to move beyond their comfort level, to embark upon the adventure of learning. As together they explore the images, stories, practices, and language of their faith, they discover new insights, new energy, and new ways of participating in God's saving mission.

*There are now opportunities for conversations where the deepest yearnings of the heart for the church can be expressed.*

*We are beginning to listen to alternative voices and minority voices, not using power plays. We are more patient and we look for further wisdom.*

As they shape a missional identity and vision, congregations are developing the expectations, practices, and structures necessary to stimulate theological reflection and dialogue. Missional churches which "think the faith" are *uncommon* communities, communities which provide the space, the time, and the support for creative conversation and critical exploration. They are recovering "the practices, habits, and dispositions necessary for theological discourse to be fruitful, for our biblical interpretation to be faithful, for our theological judgment to embody wisdom, and for our discipleship to be transformative in the midst of a world which knows not God."<sup>5</sup>

*It was a good and fruitful process. Along the way there were people grumbling, 'It takes too long.' This is a learning that needs to be stated. Yes, it took a long time, but that time created the atmosphere and the arena for change to occur. The length of time allowed us to involve lots of people, to study, explore, and discuss together. Then by the time we brought the plan in, many people had contributed, many were ready. This needs to be reiterated over and over. When dealing with a large and complex organization, with lots of 'volunteers,' you have to allow time to enable it to work through. People want things neatly and quickly packaged, but it just does not work that way.*

*Use these questions to reflect and discuss together what you have read in this section.*

1. What might it look like if the entire Christian congregation was "knowledgeable and articulate about its faith?"
2. What does the word "discipleship" mean to you?

## **Cultivating A Common Mind**

In response to the increasingly destructive nature of parliamentary style debate, many church bodies are turning to discernment or consensus methods of decision making. Yet to cultivate a common mind there must be a *community*: a people who are living in relationship with

one another by "devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). In such a community people are spending significant time together, they are talking together, they are studying Scripture together, they are bearing one another's burdens. In other words, they know one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Without this community, efforts at discernment, while well-intentioned, represent merely one more artificial technique.

In the process of nurturing a missional identity and vision congregations are becoming intentional about (1) forming a context of mutuality, (2) engaging in faithful conversation, and (3) affirming the unity of the Holy Spirit

***A Context of Mutuality.*** The cultivation of a common mind requires a context of mutuality in which people are participating in and being formed by a togetherness of faith, hope, and love. At present, many churches lack both the expectation and the experience of such mutuality. Coping with the many demands of family and work, gathering for only an hour on Sunday morning, and involving diverse groupings, most churches do not stimulate the sense of a shared venture or adventure. Yet, without a substantial experience of mutuality the cultivation of a common mind is simply impossible. The challenges and opportunities of being a disciple community call the church to set aside the time and the space to slow down and develop the skills of listening to and learning from one another--to take the time to be holy.

*At St. James Church we started meeting on a monthly basis with whomever would come to talk, usually about 20 people, 3-4 hours at a time. We held two Sunday morning extended sessions, downstairs, three hour blocks of time, with 80 people in the room. We prioritized our strategic issues, talked about the church, and did Bible study together.*

The recovery of the church's common life--a context for mutuality--is central to the church's discernment and participation in God's mission in the world. It is in the messiness, the excitement, the demands, the joys, the irritations, and the satisfactions of life together that insight, wisdom, and judgment--a common mind--are cultivated. "Christian communities provide the contexts whereby we learn--as the body of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit--to interpret, and to have our lives interpreted by, the scriptural texts such that we are formed and transformed into the moral judgement necessary for us to live faithfully before God."<sup>6</sup>

*Now we are doing a massive discernment Bible study, getting ready to paint a vision portrait. There is Bible study going on everywhere. On one*

*wall in the church we have newsprint called the "Vision Wall," with pictures of biblical images coming out of the Bible study, written, drawn, words, Bible verses--a graffiti wall, to express what we're thinking and imagining about the church. 'Bible study and prayer are very important,' people now say. They've become incredibly disciplined. They are recognizing that Bible study and prayer together are the business of the church. That's the big change.*

***Faithful Conversation.*** The cultivation of a common mind requires that people not only spend time together but talk with one another in a significant manner. More than the surface sharing of opinions, or even energetic debate, faithful conversation is a multi-layered dialogue. As such it involves *self-respect*: a knowledge of and respect for one's own beliefs or position, and *self-exposure*: an acknowledgment of and openness to the other as other, as distinct and different. And perhaps most important, a *willingness* to get so caught up in the to-and-fro of the dialogue that participants may be profoundly changed in the midst of the process.

*The payoffs at Six Mile Run have been simply in keeping the conversation open and going, persistence in staying at it. To have the number of congregational gatherings we've had, and moving to dialogue about core issues, that's definitely a new behavior on the part of the congregation. Some are experiencing this as a spiritual journey; others are just scratching their head.*

Churches that are encouraging faithful conversation are discovering that it involves affirming rather than denying the significant differences which exist within the church. "After all," said one member, "if we all thought alike, there would be no need for dialogue." Faithful conversation thus assumes not only the true and honest sharing of our thoughts and insights but also the authentic interest in the thoughts and insights of others. It thus calls for a level of vulnerability and engagement that is open to and even eager for new learnings.

*The visioning symposium was clearly a banner moment in the life of the Annual Conference. We were a fractured community. In the symposium we attempted to bring this community together and succeeded in opening lines of communication. It became a healing moment for many.*

*When we have been able to get people to sit down at table together, and what they're about is meaningful and important conversation, something meaningful and important takes place. It's difficult to pull them away from that. I thought that people's resistance*

*to giving so much time would be greater. When we give time, resources and guidance to do this, meaningful sharing and learning takes place. People don't respond, "Boy, I'm glad that's done."*

**The Unity of the Holy Spirit.** In order for dissimilar persons to engage one another with self-respect, self-exposure, and openness to change, there must be a deeper unity that serves to encourage dialogue within the community. Scripture itself offers insight into how such unity comes about. The miracle of Pentecost illustrates the nature of Christian community and Christian communication. The events of Acts 2 describe "the coming of the Spirit as an event of new communication and new communication among people long separated from each other in faith, culture, and language."<sup>7</sup> They did not all become alike, yet by receiving the Holy Spirit they were freed from the bondage of isolation that had made them fearful and suspicious of one another. Within the community created by Pentecost the barriers of language were overcome by the experience of new unity and mutual understanding in Christ. Thus faithful conversation does not depend upon all members of the congregation speaking the same language (whether ethnic, professional, cultural, or theological), but upon their openness to the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit active and present in their midst. As expressed in one congregation's vision statement:

*The Holy Spirit renews people and creates a new and diverse community. The Spirit of the Lord liberates human beings from all the fears and forces that destroy life in community as God intended. In the Spirit of Christ we are transformed. We are new.*

### **Conclusion: A Missional Identity and Vision**

Envisioning a faithful future, doing theology together, and cultivating a common mind through the communal reading and interpretation of Scripture are not ends in themselves. The purpose is to shape the church's identity and vision as that body of people in the world called to participate in God's redemptive mission. The mission of the church is not to solve society's problems, to gain political influence, or even to recruit members. "The mission of the church is to participate in the reconciling love of the triune God who reaches out to a fallen world in Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit brings strangers and enemies into God's new and abiding community."<sup>8</sup>

Over the centuries, the church has allowed its mission to be defined by something other than the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But in this new era of the church's cultural disestablishment there is the opportunity

to recover our true mission. "There is a place for Christians in the postmodern world, not as typically decent human beings but as unapologetic followers of the Way."<sup>9</sup> Becoming thought-filled, full-bodied, and whole-hearted missional churches requires time and commitment, the setting of priorities and the focusing upon common endeavors. The reality is that many congregations--including the pastor--are so busy with so many activities that to ask people to study Scripture together is an imposition. Taking the time to listen carefully to one another, to test and build upon one another's ideas, to discern the movement of the Holy Spirit in the midst of their conversation, can seem like a very strange request in a hectic, pragmatic, and task oriented world. The request may seem strange, but as those congregations accepting the challenge have discovered, a positive response yields many surprises.

*We're not paying much attention to the operational pump-up-the-church stuff anymore. I'm not sure if people are becoming genuinely disinterested in the operational stuff of our church. They seem like they're more interested in Bible study now. We also have 40 people going on a work trip to Appalachia, when we thought we might get 10 to go. 45 people participated in our Vision Conference, when we didn't expect that level of participation.*

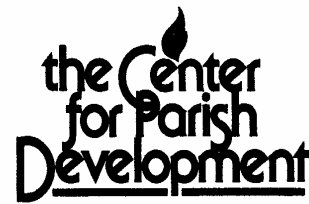
It is through the witness of the church that the world discovers the nature and purpose of God's saving work in Jesus Christ: "The fundamental form of the *Christian* interpretation of scripture is the life, activity and organization of the believing community....The performance of Scripture *is* the life of the church."<sup>10</sup> Churches that are becoming transformed into missional communities are creating the opportunities for people to come together, to hear God's Word within the biblical narratives, and together to discern what it is that is essential for their ministry. They are beginning to embody a new identity and vision. The focus of their faithful conversations is not about survival or even growth, but rather, "What does it mean to proclaim and to embody the gospel of Jesus Christ in the midst of the alienation and brokenness of our world?" Disengaging from the usual household tasks, moving beyond the quick solution, they are taking time to sit at the Lord's feet, they are choosing the "better part."

*Is all this really getting us anywhere? Yes, I think so. But it takes a while for God to train us for new challenges. Just imagine how impatient God's people were when God asked them to walk around Jericho once a day for seven days. 'We need this wall to come down, and you want us to just walk around it again?' But on the seventh day they*

walked around it, the trumpets blew, the people shouted, and the wall fell down flat. Imagine that! They were learning to depend on God. So we are patiently seeking God's leading for us.

Our journey may sound simple and smooth, but it was not without challenge or opposition. In fact there were rocks and ruts and brambles along the way. The story of God's people has never been smooth. There always are some who complain and want to go back to the old ways: 'Let's go back to Egypt.' There are those who want to short-cut God's vision and substitute their own: 'The wilderness isn't really so bad.' And those who have idols they don't want to let go of: their personal golden calves. But to those who are faithful, the promises are fulfilled.

For more information on resources to cultivate the church as the People of God, contact:



1525 East 55th Street, Suite 201 • Chicago, IL 60615  
773-752-1596 FAX 773-752-5093  
e-mail: CPD@missionalchurch.org

Use the following questions to guide your reflection and conversation.

1. What particular benefits for your church do you see in "taking time to be holy?"
2. What concerns or fears are raised for you?
3. What questions do you have at this time?

#### Endnotes

1. Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, Louis B. Weeks, *The Reforming Tradition: Presbyterians and Mainstream Protestantism* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p. 245.
2. We would like to thank all those church leaders who took the time to share their experience and insights with us.
3. T. Richard Snyder, *Once You Were No People: The Church and the Transformation of Society* (Meyer-Stone Books, 1988), p. 56.
4. Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Fortress Press, 1991), p. 65.
5. L. Gregory Jones, "Toward A Recovery of Theological Discourse in United Methodism," *Quarterly Review*, Summer, 1989, pp. 32-33.
6. Stephen E. Fowl & L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture & Ethics in Christian Life* (Eerdmans, 1989), p. 75.
7. Daniel L. Migliore, "The Missionary God and the Missionary Church," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Spring 1998, p. 21.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
9. Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: the church in a post-christian society* (InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 32.
10. Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (SCM Press, 1986), pp. 42-43.