

# the center letter

*Cultivating Missional Communities*

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## **Designing the Missional Church: God's Letter to the World**

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*You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us written not with ink but what the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. - 2 Corinthians 3:2-3.*

All the documents in the New Testament are written to missional congregations. Darrell Guder reminds us that those congregations were all the result of missionary witness, beginning with Pentecost.<sup>1</sup> They were all a fulfillment of the promise of Jesus to his disciples on Ascension Day: "When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The congregations of the first generation existed to continue the witness that had brought them to faith and new life. All the writings of the New Testament address that missional vocation. All of them deal with the way that each of these congregations, in its very particular place and with its very particular challenges, will continue the witness to Jesus. – will be the church.

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is an example. He is grappling with their faithfulness as witnesses to Jesus Christ in Corinth. He is not telling them to get involved in mission. They have no choice about that. That is why they exist. But they need constantly to learn how this translates into their daily living as a Christian community, their actions, their attitudes, and their decisions. Their mission is not merely a message they communicate when they use certain terms and tell certain stories. Their mission defines everything they are and say and do as a congregation.

To help them understand that, Paul uses a remarkable image in the opening verses of the third chapter: "You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tables of stone but on tablets of human hearts." You Corinthians, Paul is saying, are God's letter to the world. This is God's Word not only to the Corinthians but also to every Christian community at every time and in every place. That is who we are, God's letters to the world. In these few words, the apostle lays out for us the foundational definition of our calling as congregations—as Christian communities. In the formation of God's missionary church, the Holy Spirit is always at work, drawing a community together, shaping a witness for a particular place.

This year's Center Letter series focuses on the question, "How can the church demonstrate a missional vision that faithfully practices the gospel as it engages today's cultural and global realities." The series will address and explore the challenges of designing the missional church.

**The Medium Becomes the Message.** What if all the world knew about the love of God was from what is mediated through the life of the church? As have churches through the ages, the church in Corinth was struggling to live in holiness and freedom within the very real structures of a given social context. This was very difficult because along with a reputation for prosperity, Corinth had also become a by-word for immoral living. While Paul argues that the very existence of the church at Corinth is manifest evidence of the competence of his ministry, the quality of the attitudes and practices of the Corinthian community could suggest that Paul needed to go back to the drawing board.

The point is that we in the church today, as communities of faith, are God's letters, God's demonstration community. The "you" in this phrase is plural: "all of you together" are God's letter to the world. Everything we do as a Christian community relates in some way to this fundamental task: that God writes us as God's letter to the world. The question is, "What message will the letter give?" The answer is expressed by each church community as it designs its life and ministry.

If the letter is to be a clear legible communication of the Gospel, then communities need to pay attention to how they

are living out this good news among themselves. They need to be sure that God has the freedom and opportunity to write them, to shape and form them. They need to look hard at the process of their own formation as a Christian community, at the quality of their own common life, at how they practice stewardship of the resources God has entrusted to them, at how they structure themselves as a missional community. God's writing of his letters to the world doesn't just happen automatically. It is a disciplined and demanding process of composition, of formation, of engraving good news indelibly on our hearts so that as a community we can function as God's letter.

**First Christian Church, Des Moines, Iowa.** As the community of First Christian Church in Des Moines, Iowa gathered for worship on March 19, 2000 the congregation had completed an extended time of study, dialogue and prayer to discover God's vision for their church's life and ministry. This church, like a growing number of others, resisted grasping for quick fix solutions to church renewal. Instead of asking operationally "What program or strategy can revitalize our church?," they wrestled deeply with whether or not they had the correct vision of what their church ought to be in the first place. For over a year this church had been

involved in a process of prayerfully asking and answering, "What is it that God is calling us to be and do?" Only with a newly discerned vision in hand was the church community ready to confront the challenge of designing the details of a vision led common life and shared ministry. Pastor Timothy Diebel expressed the challenge to his congregation this way:

*Though we will never finish learning, never finish studying, never finish paying attention to our surroundings and ourselves, it is time to shift the focus from preparation to participation; from getting ready to getting on with it. It is time to move into the wheel and allow God's fingers to give us shape. With a new sense of purpose and hope, it will mean not so much a different way of "doing" church, as a different way of "being" church. ... The wheel is spinning, waiting; waiting to see if, after all this preparation, anything will begin to take shape by God's hands with us.<sup>2</sup>*

**Ministry Design in Four Key Areas.** Embodying the mission and message of Jesus Christ is the task of designing the missional church. How is the church to give living organizational expression to a missional vision that faithfully engages today's cultural and global realities? Four key areas essential for missional transformation provide a helpful way for thinking about and organizing the work of designing the missional church. Focus points for each key area listed below, illustrate concrete challenges for ministry design. These focus areas will become topics for in depth reflection in subsequent Center Letters.

1. Common Life: How to shape the church's common life and shared ministry in a way that expresses Christian faith, a way of "one-anothering" that offers to the watching world a different way of being and living together. Focus points for common life include:

- € Hospitality: How to cultivate open and welcoming communities in response to God's boundary-breaking love.
- € Reconciliation: How to practice reconciliation that involves authentic confession, repentance, forgiveness, and healing.
- € Discernment and Decision-Making: How to cultivate the skills and foster the climate that will enable the church to discern God's will and make effective decisions.

2. Formation: How to design and develop the processes and practices that form the church as a contrast community within today's cultural and global context.

- € Collaborative Ministry: How to form faithful and effective leaders.
  - € Community Formation: How to identify and address the obstacles and opportunities for the formation of Christian community.
  - € Learning and Discerning Communities: How to form communities capable of learning and discerning the will of God for their ministry.
  - € Christian Witness: How to form communities capable of witnessing to the inbreaking of God's reign.
3. Resources: How to cultivate, develop, utilize, and manage the many gifts entrusted to the church's stewardship in a manner that offers an alternative to cultural patterns of accumulation.
- € A Theology of Stewardship: How to develop and share a theology of stewardship.
  - € Budget Decision-Making Process: How to develop a budget building process and plan for resource allocation that reflects faithful collaboration and use of gifts.
  - € Economic Justice: How to challenge the materialism of our culture and address the disparity and distribution of resources within the Church.
4. Structure: How to design the church's organizational architecture to manifest both the wholeness and the diversity of body of Christ so needed within our fragmented world.
- € Organizational Architecture: How to design the organizational architecture of the Church to facilitate common life and ministry.
  - € Systems of Management: How to embed a coherent, consistent and collaborative system of management and governance throughout the Church.
  - € Linking Systems: How to develop a system that links all governance and ministry units of the Church.

The lifestyle of God's new people does not fit easily into the world's structures and expectations, nor does it come "naturally." It must be learned, practiced, and supported—cultivated—within Christian community. Christians are not born, they are made through baptism and teaching (Matt. 28:19-20). Thus, participation in Christian community involves the life-long development of distinctive skills, language, and behavior. And here is the purpose of ministry design—of the programs and ministries of the church -- to embody God's vision, to become God's letters to the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Guder, Darrell L., "God's Letters to the World" in *The Gospel and Our Culture*, Vol. 12, No. 3, September 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Exerpts from a worship service held at First Christian Church, Des Moines, Iowa, March 19, 2000 led by Rev. Timothy Diebel.

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