

the center letter

Cultivating Missional Communities

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Living Missionally: Paying Attention to the World

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As people who love the Lord Jesus Christ, we desperately need as North American people to view our culture from a missionary perspective.... So as we turn on our television sets, as we look at the desperate poverty in our cities, as we think of the issues of abuse, as we reflect upon what it means for human beings to be dying of AIDS, we need to be able to see what Jesus sees, to hear what Jesus hears, to touch what Jesus touches, and to go where Jesus goes.¹

Whether in North America or Australia, Europe or Africa, the Pacific Islands or Asia, as the church seeks to live missionally—to discern, celebrate, and participate in God's redemptive mission in the world—it must intentionally learn how to become a missionary community. Developing missionary sensitivities and vision involves approaching the church's particular social-cultural-historical context with receptivity, insight, and wisdom. As sign, foretaste, and instrument of the reign of God the church is called to bring the good news of the kingdom into engagement with the deep yearnings and the concrete challenges of its worldly context. As a disciple community, as faithful followers of Jesus Christ, the church will be empowered by the Holy Spirit to see, to hear, to touch, and to go where Jesus goes.

During 2003 *The Center Letter* will explore what it means to live missionally. Four central topics will be considered:

- (1) *Paying Attention to the World*: The church does not exist for itself, but for the world which God loves so much that God gave "his only Son" (John 3:16), "that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Living missionally means that the church takes the time to observe and to analyze its context, to distinguish between the positive and the negative, to figure out what is right with the world and what is wrong, to sort out the wheat from the weeds (see Matt. 13:24).
- (2) *Paying Attention to the Gospel*: The church's engagement with the world is shaped by its engagement with the good news of the forgiveness, reconciliation, and new life brought about by Jesus Christ. Through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit the church is called to be a learning community. As missional, the church both learns from the world and from the gospel as it seeks to proclaim with clarity and relevance "the wonderful deeds of the one who called you out of darkness into God's marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).
- (3) *Paying Attention to One Another*: The church gives witness to the world of the gospel of Jesus Christ by embodying the joy and freedom of life in communion with God and with one another. Unless the church itself is living the gospel, there will be little power in its witness to the world. As it penetrates deeply into the questions, dilemmas, anxieties, and frustrations of the its cultural context, the church itself will be a "credible demonstration that life lived by the pattern of commitment to Jesus is imaginable, possible, and relevant in the modern and postmodern age."²
- (4) *Paying Attention to Change*: While through faith the church has experienced the love and grace of God's reign, it has not yet arrived at the fullness of God's new creation. Thus living missionally implies being a people on a journey, seeking an ever deepening sense of God's presence and God's will. Being open to change—to conversion of thought, expression, and practice—will be an ongoing part of the church's life as it pays attention to the world, to the gospel, and to one another.

Paying Attention to Context. In Jesus of Nazareth, God entered into the concrete life and history of humanity. By taking on human flesh, by becoming incarnate, God can be known from within the human situation. Thus the church pays attention to the world, not to be relevant, not to get more members, but because the very heart of the gospel calls it to know and love the world as God knows and loves the world.

The term "context" comes from the Latin *contexere*, meaning to braid, weave, or connect. Paying attention to context thus means attending to the weaving or connecting of various factors including: personal, family, or group life; the cultural constructions of shared languages, customs, or beliefs; social location, whether male or female, rich or poor, from North America or Latin America; and the reality of social changes.³

There are at least three reasons why living missionally involves intentional paying attention to context. (1) *Contextual Proximity*: Without critical and analytical distance, the church is simply too close to its context to be able to discern accurately the hidden and unquestioned assumptions about the world, God's mission, the church's ministry. (2) *Contextual Diversity*: There is no longer any safe place to withdraw from the pluralism of cultures, religions, and lifestyles. The church is called to provide multiple opportunities to surface and bring competing worldviews into constructive conversation. (3) *Contextual Insight*: Living missionally requires the ability to leave that which is known and comfortable and to venture into the unknown and disquieting. Going where Jesus goes may involve listening to and learning from those who hold different convictions and live in different ways.⁴

Key Symbols of the Context. In every age the church has the responsibility to reinterpret its faith tradition in light of its context. To stimulate discussion, three symbols will be explored here: the gun, the internet, The Prayer of Jabez.

The Gun. The gun is a symbol of the American romance with violence. At a time when the current administration seems determined to lead the nation into war, this statement seems obvious. Yet war is not the only manifestation of the culture's violent nature. Consider the statistics on homicides or on child and spousal abuse, the graphic depiction of violence on television or films, and the reality and threat of terrorism. Violence seems to be a part of the American way of life. While it may take different shapes in different contexts, no part of the planet is protected from violence.

Looking beneath the surface of violence can be found a deep longing for safety and security. The irony is that the more people arm themselves with guns, the more they live behind gates, the more weapons they build, the more afraid they become. No one is immune to this dehumanizing process. It is into such a world of anxiety and paranoia that the church is called to offer an alternative vision. The Bible declares "perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). "Perfect is the expression of Christian maturity that is born out of a confidence that God's love is the conquest of fear and death. Neither sentimentalism nor idealism, it is the affirmation that God's life-giving Spirit abides in this society and world in spite of the tenacious scandal of violence."⁵

The World Wide Web. The web is a symbol of amazing advances in technology that permeate daily life. There are positive aspects to the communications revolution. The internet can enable people from different cultural, religious, and political backgrounds to develop mutual understanding and respect. Information about global trends, innovative ideas, and issue oriented movements can be gained in a manner of seconds. There are tremendous educational possibilities as the web provides access to books, schools, or libraries. Yet such technology is not value-free: "Individual habits, perceptions, concepts of self, ideas of space and time, social relationships, and moral and political boundaries have all been powerfully restructured in the course of modern technological development."⁶ In other words, "Technology redefines 'freedom,' 'truth,' 'intelligence,' 'fact,' 'wisdom,' 'memory,' 'history'—all words we live by."⁷

Communication is not just about information, it is also the way in which people discover identity, sustain relationships, and create community. The freedom of the web can lead to isolation as the very technology that brings people together also keeps them apart. Inhabiting "virtual reality" may result in a vicarious way of life, living on-line through the lives of others. And when separated from larger frameworks of meaning, wisdom and knowledge may be lost in the flood of "bits" of information. Living missionally means appreciating and utilizing the advances while at the same time placing technology within the context of God's creative and redemptive activity. As one author suggests: "The fruits of the incessant technological change are [to be] measured against the durable harvest of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22)."⁸

The Prayer of Jabez. During an uneventful time in Israel's history, a faithful man named Jabez prayed a simple prayer and gained the favor of God (1 Chron. 4:10). Now, a small book has prompted millions of people to memorize and repeat the short prayer daily. The popularity of the book and other related merchandise (posters, T-shirts, jewelry, videos) symbolizes what might be termed the "reenchantment" of Western culture.⁹ While many observers thought that with the emergence of a scientific worldview, all angels, demons, occult powers, and deities would be exorcised, a look at any popular or Christian bookstore demonstrates that this is not the case. There is a widespread hunger and search for "the sacred," for that which transcends and gives meaning to the difficult and confusing realities of life.

While it may be true that many readers of this book are seeking the power of prayer rather than the power of God, it does indicate that the church has the opportunity to rediscover and share the richness of its spiritual tradition. Christians pray "in Jesus' name," because they believe that through his life, death, and resurrection they are able to know the character of the God who creates and sustains all of reality. And Jesus taught the disciples how to pray by giving them the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6). It is submission to God's will that brings participation in God's power, a power which exposes human illusions and brings true favor with God. The Lord's Prayer does not gloss over the harsh realities of life, but announces "forgiveness for the guilt-laden, health for the diseased, hope for the despairing, and restored relations for the alienated."¹⁰ Even in a secular context, this is Good News!

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¹ Richard Mouw, "The Missionary Location of the North American Churches," *Confident Witness—Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America*, Craig Van Gelder, ed. (Eerdmans, 1999), p. 15.

² George R. Hunsberger, "The Newbiggin Gauntlet: Developing a Domestic Missiology for North America," *Missiology* XIX, Oct. 1991, p. 404.

³ See Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Orbis Books, Revised 2002), pp. 5-6.

⁴ David Scotchmer, "Symbols Become Us," in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*, George Hunsberger & Craig Van Gelder, eds. (Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 159-160.

⁵ Will Coleman, "Being Christian in a World of Fear," *Many Voices, One God: Being Faithful in a Pluralistic World*, Walter Brueggeman & George Stroup, eds. (Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p. 43.

⁶ Langdon Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor* (University of Chicago Press, 1986), p.9.

⁷ Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (Vintage Books, 1993), p. 8.

⁸ Ruth Conway, *Choices at the Heart of Technology* (Trinity Press International, 1999), p. 115.

⁹ Mouw, "The Missionary Location of the North American Churches," p. 4.

¹⁰ Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelization and the Subversive Memory of Jesus* (Fortress Press, 1984), p. 76.

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