

# the center letter

*Cultivating Missional Communities*

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Volume 35, Number 1

January 2005

## Changing the Conversation

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When the members of church boards and councils gather, their conversation is usually focused around what they assume to be the "business of the church." By "church business" they usually mean the economics of church administration. In one church council meeting, the topic of conversation was the custodian's request to purchase a \$25 container of floor wax. For the next 45 minutes, council members debated this purchase. "It's not in the budget." "How shall we pay for it?" "Do we really need to wax our floors?" "Can we get the wax cheaper from some other supplier?" One council member, a Wall Street executive, grew more and more restive as this conversation went on endlessly. Finally he could stand it no more. He took out his wallet, placed \$25 on the table, and said, "Here's the twenty-five dollars for the floor wax. Now can we get on with the business of the church!"

This particular council member grew impatient with a conversation that apparently assumed that the business of the church was primarily about economics. He believed that the business of the church had to do with other matters, much more important than floor wax. He wanted to change the conversation.

In congregations, small or large, urban or rural, there are many people like this man who want to change the conversation in their churches. They are asking, "What does it mean to be a faithful and fruitful congregation?" By asking this question, they are engaging in a process that requires careful and thoughtful theological reflection and discussion. They recognize the need for every generation of church leaders to identify and explore the assumptions they are making about the church's life and mission.

**The Evaluation Challenge.** Changing the conversation is hard work because it involves changing the model people use to evaluate their church. Every time people engage in analysis and evaluation, they draw upon assumptions about the church's calling and mission. These assumptions take the form of a model, a set of criteria, that acts as a set of spectacles through which they see the church.

Most of the council members discussing floor wax believed that they were fulfilling their church leadership responsibilities. They were assuming that their church is an economic institution so they were operating out of an economic model. They were protecting the budget, monitoring expenditures, keeping costs down. These are all responsible things for church leaders to do. Their problem was that they spent half of their meeting time in an economic conversation and neglected other more important and weightier matters.

The conversation in other churches is based on a viability model. One church consultant recently stated that a congregation, to be viable, must have at least 700 members. He was assuming that a church requires a full-time, professionally-trained pastor and staff with salaries, benefits, housing, secretarial support, a well-equipped church building requiring maintenance, and a church program to serve all age groups. Many church boards and councils focus their conversation month after month on how to make their church "viable." Of course, viability is not a biblical concept. Furthermore, this consultant's notion of what makes a church viable has little to do with biblical understandings of what makes a church "faithful and fruitful."

The conversation in other churches focuses on a church growth model, once again based on quantitative measures. These churches ask, "Are we growing?" If their church isn't growing, then, according to this model, it is failing to carry out the Great Commission in Matthew 25. The Church Growth Movement has attempted to discover why some churches grow and others don't. "The focus is on strategy

development and cultural analysis with biblical passages appropriated to give validity to the perspectives."<sup>1</sup>

In still other congregations a consumer model dominates the conversation. People ask, "Does our church meet people's needs?" This model assumes that the mission of the church is to fulfill people's wants. Thus a "successful" church will provide a broad range of programs to address the varied expressed needs and wants of its members.

The point is that (1) many different models are in use in North America today to evaluate congregations; (2) each model is based on assumptions about the calling and mission of the church; (3) these assumptions need to be made explicit so that they can be examined; and (4) each model leads to its own sets of remedial actions. Therefore, to change the conversation involves clarifying and often challenging the assumptions underlying the model in use.

**A Missional Model.** The Center for Parish Development has, since it founding in 1968, been developing a missional model of the church. This missional model, when introduced into a church, changes the conversation.<sup>2</sup> The model has grown out of (1) extensive work and applied research over the past 37 years with church organizations of varying sizes in different geographical contexts, related to a wide range of traditions, and with diverse institutional polities, and (2) intensive conversations with theologians and missiologists from North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa.<sup>3</sup>

We affirm the statement in *Missional Church* that "the calling of the church to be missional—to be a sent community—leads the church to step beyond the given cultural forms that carry dubious assumptions about what the church is, what its public role should be, and what its voice should sound like. Testing and revising our assumptions and practices against a vision of the reign of God promises the deep renewal of the missional soul of the church that we need. By daily receiving and entering the reign of God, through corporate praying for

its coming, and longing for its appearance, and in public living under its mantle, this missional character of the church will be nourished and revived."<sup>4</sup>

The missional model, to be shared in this 2005 Center Letter series, changes the conversation.

**1. It helps clarify the calling of the Church.** One of the casualties of the current displacement of the church in North American culture is the loss of a clear sense of calling. The church's calling, once assumed to be clear, today it is unclear. A missional model can both reveal this lack of clarity and can be used to enable church leaders and members to discern God's calling and sending afresh. A missional model with its emphasis upon the church as a called community of God's people sent to be *sign*, *foretaste*, and *instrument* of the reign of God, can provide the church with a clear and shared vision of the calling of the church.

**2. It helps identify the essential variables.** A missional model helps church leaders understand and agree upon the multiple factors that confront them. It aids the cognitive process by enabling people to see their church more clearly. It helps them select and grasp what is essential. It simplifies their "world" and makes it possible for them to analyze it in a more systematic way. At the same time, it helps them avoid simplistic thinking by keeping them mindful of the large number of interrelated and interdependent factors which play a part in the life and work of the church. A missional model helps church leaders and members clarify and relate various elements of a model to one another.

**3. It helps put complex situations in perspective.** A missional model clearly demonstrates how the social and cultural context shapes the church's life and ministry. Yet it also shows that the religious heritage and the unique history of each church organization also plays a key role. By bringing all these forces into "conversation" with each other, a missional model helps church leaders and members avoid thinking of the church only as a sociological institution, only an economic institution, or only as a theological institution.

**4. It provides a means of utilizing different concepts, theories, and fields of knowledge.** A missional model draws upon many different disciplines or fields of knowledge: theology is predominant, church history, sociology, anthropology, organization development, psychology, economics, and others. The classical theological fields and the so-called

"ministry" or "change" fields come together in a dynamic way to provide help in understanding the church.

**5. It provides a frame of reference to define and evaluate how well the church is doing.** Not only does a missional model help church leaders and members evaluate the effectiveness of aspects of church life, but, by drawing upon congruence theory, it enables them to discover how consistent the various elements in the model are with each other—how well they "fit." It reminds them of the importance of internal congruence, so that the lived experience of people participating in the life and work of the church is congruent with the calling of the church.

**The Church's Culture-Forming Responsibility.** The missional model assumes that the purpose of the church is to discern, celebrate, and participate in God's redemptive mission in the world. This purpose is achieved by shaping or forming a community of people into a Christian way of life. Every church body, whether a congregation, regional organization, or theological education institution, has a "culture-forming" responsibility. It is to cultivate, or form, a people in a particular way. Tertullian, a theologian in the early church, was speaking of this culture-forming responsibility when he declared, "Christians are not born, they are made."

Forming a Christian community that participates in God's redemptive mission in the world is a challenging responsibility. The various forces of the modern world are always at work socializing ("forming", "enculturating") persons into the ways of the world and its values of freedom, individualism, self-reliance, self-advancement, competition, and the use of violence to achieve their goals. In the midst of these influences, the church is called to form a people with the "habits of the heart" described by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. The church is called to teach people how to talk, how to act, how to disagree, how to reconcile, how to forgive, how to love. In other words, how to see the world in a peculiar way—a Christlike way.

As expressed by Stanley Hauerwas, the role of the church is to cultivate a people "who can risk being peaceful in a violent world, risk being kind in a competitive society, risk being faithful in an age of cynicism, risk being gentle among those who admire the tough, risk love when it may not be returned, because we have the confidence that in Christ we have been reborn into a new reality."

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<sup>1</sup> Gailyn Van Rheenen "Contrasting Missional and Church Growth Perspectives," Monthly Missiological Reflections #34.

<sup>2</sup> **The Profile of a Missional Church.** Growing out of this association, the Center has now developed a major tool to help churches evaluate themselves: *The Profile of a Missional Church (POMC)*. For information about using this resource in your church as a research partner, contact the Center.

<sup>3</sup> The Center is an active participant in the Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN), The Ekklesia Project, Allelon, and other groups exploring creative approaches to the church's life and ministry. We have helped to shape, and we have been shaped by, the research and discussion within these groups. Center staff members serve on GOCN research teams and have been primary authors of one of the Ekklesia pamphlets and several GOCN books: see Darrell Guder, ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Eerdmans 1998); James Brownson, ed. *Storm Front: The Good News of God* (Eerdmans 2003); Lois Barrett ed *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness* (Eerdmans 2004).

<sup>4</sup> *Missional Church*, Guder, ed., p. 109.

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