

the center letter

Cultivating Missional Communities

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Going to the Roots: Foundations for the Missional Church

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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, longing for its appearance, and in public living under its mantle, this missional character of the church will be nourished and revived.¹

In the midst of a rapidly and radically changing cultural context, the church is being challenged to transform its basic identity and its vocation—to go to its very roots. The familiar understandings and the comfortable postures of the past are experiencing profound challenge today. The old paradigms and models are insufficient for the faithful and effective realization of the church's divine purpose. Being faithful to a living and dynamic God who is actively present in changing historical situations—"Behold, I am doing a new thing" (Isa. 43:19)—requires that the church itself must be adventurous and open to radical change. For the community of God's people to "sing to the Lord a new song" (Isa. 42:10), it must learn new ways to put the questions, develop new frameworks for dealing with them, and craft new proposals for shaping the church's ministry and mission.

Church leaders, clergy and lay alike, are challenged to respond. They have the responsibility not only for managing the present ministry but also for shaping a vision for the future of their church bodies: local, regional, national. How will they give leadership in this extraordinary moment in history? The most insightful church leaders will recognize the need to get to the roots, to examine the presuppositions that inform the church's vision, mission, goals, structures, leadership, member involvement, and engagement with an increasingly secularized world. They will lead the church through this fundamental theological and ecclesial task.

During 2006 *The Center Letter* will explore central theological perspectives which form the foundation for the missional church. The prevailing "paradigm"—the whole set of assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, expectations, and behavior related to and expressed through organizational practices, symbols, goals, programs, and structures—is being challenged. In order for the church to be faithful to its divine calling in tomorrow's world, the church is called to move from the existing "establishment church" paradigm shaped by cultural forms to a new—yet very old—"ecclesial" or "missional" paradigm shaped by theological themes.

The "Establishment Church" Paradigm. This paradigm came into being with the settlement of North America and dominated church thought and practice into the 1960s. During this period, mainstream churches were a dominant force in society, both formally and informally. They functioned as an integral part of the dominant political-military-economic-industrial-social establishment. "Success" is defined using society's values of "bigger," "better," "more." The "establishment church" paradigm is still held by most church leaders and members (and most church consultants). It makes at least these basic assumptions which, while familiar and comfortable, need to be challenged and transformed:

1. **Personal Sanctuary.** The church is a haven from the world, dedicated to the pursuit of a solitary religious experience for its members. A distinction is made between sacred and secular, between the private and public realms of life, between church and world. Withdrawing from the turmoil and struggle of daily life, members are refreshed and renewed by their private interaction with God. The church functions as a place for individual religious experience and growth.

2. **Society's Chaplain.** Accepting its place within the private sphere of human life, the church fulfills the religious needs of society. It therefore (1) *legitimizes*: blessing the existing cultural virtues, values, and structures; (2) serves as *conscience*: articu-

lating and teaching moral standards; and (3) provides *social assistance*: filling the gap in human services. As the church engages the larger culture, it preaches and teaches a kind of ethics which will speak to and therefore be appropriate for non-Christians as well as Christians.

3. **Functional Guide.** The resources and practices of the church—scripture, tradition, doctrine, worship, sacraments, preaching, program ministries, ecclesiastical structure, and communal life—are useful to the extent that they serve as *functional guides* for the development and expression of individual belief, piety, devotion, morality, and service.

4. **Consumer Driven.** Clergy are *professionals* trained to develop and deliver religious goods and services: preaching, teaching, pastoral care, and administration. Lay people are *consumers* of clerical services and functions, who sometimes help the clergy as volunteers (usually untrained) in ministry.

5. **An Agent of Mission.** The church provides the resources and training to enable lay people to witness within the "real" world and reach out to the unchurched. Formed and informed by the services and programs of the church, lay people are to exhibit Christian commitments and standards within the various interactions of their daily lives, thus witnessing to their faith, changing the values and structures of society, and encouraging others to join the church.

6. **A Stable Context.** The church can *control* its own destiny. It operates in a relatively stable and predictable environment. It can therefore take its time making minor changes in the ways it structures and orders its life and ministry, and these changes can be introduced *incrementally*.

All six of these basic assumptions need to be challenged. They reflect the North American individualization and privatization of Christianity. They trivialize the Gospel, reflect an inadequate ecclesiology, make the church a tool of the cultural establishment, distort biblical understandings of the church's mission, and fail to recognize the unprecedented challenge and opportunity confronting the church today.

The "Missional Church" Paradigm. In sharp contrast, this paradigm seeks to recover theological roots that have been lost and to awaken hope in divine promises that have been forgotten. For the church to function on the basis of this paradigm, all aspects of church life and work will need to be re-thought and re-conceived. The *missional church paradigm* asserts that a creative and dynamic God is calling the church to ministry and mission in a world that is extremely different from the world of even ten years ago and vastly different from the world prior to the 1960s when the "establishment church" paradigm held sway.

1. **Ecclesia.** The church is *ecclesia*—a public assembly—to which God is calling all peoples to be transformed into the people of God. As *sign*, *foretaste*, and *instrument* of the reign of God, inaugurated in Jesus Christ, the church's mission is to proclaim and embody the ultimate destiny of all humanity in God's perfect society of joy and generosity, hope and vision, love and compassion, peace and justice.

2. **A Contrast Society.** Rather than fulfilling self-defined religious needs, the church offers the world a new paradigm: *a contrast society*. Transformed by God's love and forgiveness, the church manifests a different way of being human: a particular and peculiar people who learn and practice a unique and powerful "togetherness" as they seek to be faithful to their promises, love their enemies, welcome the stranger, tell the truth, honor the poor, suffer for righteousness.

3. **Cultivating a New People.** The church's resources, practices, and services *cultivate a new people*, a people learning and practicing the virtues, habits, and behaviors of the reconciling way of life disclosed in the words and deeds, ministry and mission, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As a public, visible, and social reality of transformed relationships, this people manifests the relational fruits of the Holy Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal. 5:22).

4. **A Community of Disciples.** *Laos* (lay people and clergy together) are called to be a community of disciples who through faith in Jesus Christ participate in the new life of the Spirit. As "stewards of the mysteries of God," corporately they discern, nurture, and manifest their diverse gifts in a common life and shared ministry of obedience and faithfulness to God's creative and redemptive purposes for all of humanity.

5. **The Locus of Mission.** The *locus of mission* is the life and practice of the church. As a witnessing community of God's people, the church embodies and announces the transforming power of God in a dynamic and open communal life of celebration, commitment, love, service, meaning, and purpose. The church's mission is graciously to invite the world to participate in God's re-creation of humanity: to experience the freedom, joy, and wholeness of life in communion with God and in fellowship with each other.

6. **An Unpredictable Environment.** The church cannot control its own destiny in today's world. Called and empowered by the living God for mission in a *turbulent and unpredictable environment*, it does not have the luxury of time to make the required changes incrementally. *Systemic changes* are essential if the church is to be faithful and effective now and in the future. These changes must be designed and introduced *strategically*.

The current crisis facing North American churches is also an *opportunity* rich with potential. Embracing change as an opportunity for greater faithfulness, church leaders can view the current crisis as an opportunity to re-vision, to transform the church, to participate in God's ongoing creative and redemptive mission for all humanity.

A Theological Challenge. As the people called to announce and participate in God's creative and redemptive activity, the church must make major and profound changes in the ways it perceives its identity, imagines its future, and behaves as a worshipping and witnessing community.

Thus the church is continually to engage in the complex task of rooting itself in its heritage as it interacts in a critical but responsive manner with the challenges and opportunities of its contemporary context. This requires changing the very character and agenda of the church, converting it from one mode of being to a new mode of being, from one self-understanding to another self-understanding. It means making a paradigm shift—a major and profound conceptual, behavioral, and organizational change—that transforms the very underpinnings on which the church currently operates.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Why is "going to the roots" important within the current social/cultural context?
2. What aspects of the "establishment church" currently shape your congregation?
3. What is different about the "missional church" paradigm?
4. What aspects of missional church express your hopes and dreams for your congregation?
5. How is the change from an establishment paradigm to a missional paradigm a theological challenge?

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¹ Darrell Guder, ed., *Missional Church: The Sending of the Church in North America* (Eerdmans, 1998), p. 109.

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