

## Mission Possible

### Mission – theological foundations

Mission is best understood as *missio Dei* - the Mission of God. This is understood in essence as God's action of reconciliation in the world. The Father sends the Son, Father and Son send the Spirit, and Father, Son and Spirit send the church into the world. Thus the church is called to share in what God is doing.

The story of mission can be said to begin with God's creation of a good world, or healthy relationship, marred by the Fall. Everything is broken – relationships with God, with each other and with creation. God's rescue plan begins with the call of God to Abram in Genesis 12: 2, 3

*"I will make you into a great nation  
and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.*

*I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you."*

The consummation of God's mission is glimpsed in His promise to make all things new -

*Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."*

*5 He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." (Revelation 21: 1 – 5)*

All this "making things new" is accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

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This deals with our separation from God – Romans 5: 10

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It deals with our separation from each other – Ephesians 2: 14 - 16

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It defeats evil spiritual powers – Colossians 2: 15

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It ultimately reconciles all things to God – Colossians 1: 20

The people who will bless the nations are made up of communities who will bless their neighbours. And all over the world these communities are growing – that's the mission of God in process, and that's how individual churches work out the church's participation in what God is doing.

### Mission in the new spiritual landscape

As we know, Scotland is not what it was from a spiritual perspective – churches are emptying, buildings are being sold, off, Christian influence in society is on the wane, and Christianity, and religion in general, is the target of an onslaught from an aggressive secularism. However, we should remember that this new spiritual landscape is not all bleak – some churches are growing, especially ethnic minority churches, and churches in London, and there is a new wave of church planting. This may not help us in our particular situations, but it should encourage us to see the UK as a mixed picture spiritually rather than a uniformly negative one.

How shall we think about evangelism in this new context? We need to remember that though evangelicals use language of conversion that speaks of it as something dramatic and often instantaneous, in experience it is rarely that. More commonly it is a gradual process, often with several stages of “revelation” along the way. This understanding will shape how we practice evangelism.

### **Challenges to evangelism**

There is a lack of knowledge of the Christian story, so please don't assume knowledge of Biblical stories, or of Biblical morality, or even understandings of concepts we take for granted in our distinct Christian language. People also have to see past the misinformation in the media, which results in misperceptions of Christians, and where extremes of Christian behaviour become normative. Remember too that even if people do start coming to church, it is, for many, frankly weird and foreign. It is not unlike the feeling of discomfort we might feel about going to a mosque for prayers.

### **Conversion - Sudden or gradual?**

Everts and Shaupp, two American Inter-Varsity staff workers, have recently published *Turning to Jesus* (IVP), in which they discern five stages that converts in Western contexts will move through in their way to faith (and not all will necessarily move right through).

- Trusting a Christian
- Becoming curious
- Opening up to change
- Seeking after God
- Entering His kingdom

So when we seek to share our faith, we start further back, and see evangelism as a process of accompaniment. There has been much talk recently (and rightly) of the need for apologetics, both to demonstrate the reasonableness of Christianity to non-Christians and also to bulwark the faith of believers. However, we need also what we might call the apologetics of life. If we can truly be a blessing in our communities, then that will help respond to some of the criticisms levelled at Christians in the media. And because God is active and speaking, he will speak to non-Christians, sometimes in unusual ways. Part of evangelism may be helping people make sense of their spiritual experiences. And of course, before we present our answers, we need to make sure that we begin by answering questions *others* ask. We need to consider too this question - where are the meeting places? IN other words, how will Christians connect with non-Christians in order to share faith with them?

### **Challenges for leaders**

- Our meeting “places” are likely to be church members – so we have to equip the saints for mission (because apart from anything else, we're not omnipresent, and the more confident witnesses there are in a community, the more likely seekers are to connect with them).
- Turning a church out of itself – how do we help church members have a confidence in their own faith and how to talk about it with others?
- Being in “the world” ourselves – this is not a comfortable place for many of us who feel much happier being with fellow believers, but we need to learn to be in regular contact with non-Christians (and not just the nominal members of our churches). This will help us understand better our society and culture, and also to experience more the challenges which church members face.
- Feed our creativity and imagination – often we will be inspired to see new opportunities for the Gospel in our own community by hearing of what others are doing. Remember, every church and parish situation is different.

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“Generous” learning – make sure that we keep growing both spiritually and in awareness of different approaches to mission. We need to learn from others even if we disagree with some of their emphases.

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Know who God has made us – Romans 12: 1 – 8. Don’t feel we have to be anything other than ourselves, filled with the Spirit. There are a variety of gifts, and we don’t have to demonstrate them all.

So, is mission possible? Yes it is – but we need to be realistic that we undertake it in tough times at present, and we must not minimise the nature of the difficulties we face. Mission is also certain – “I **will** build my church”, says Jesus, and he is doing just that. So, we need to be both expectant and dependent on Him. Prayer is crucial in all this. And remember that mission is God’s action – so prepare to be surprised by where and how he works, and be bold to join in.

### **Some resources which may help**

*The Provocative Church* by Graham Tomlin – an accessible book exploring ways in which churches can become communities which provoke the question “Why do you live the way in which you do and why do you do the things you do?”

*Center Church* by Tim Keller – a comprehensive (some would say exhaustive) introduction to the theology of mission and ecclesiology in context, with lots of insights into how to develop holistic ministry from out of a church. Two caveats – firstly, this is a heavy book, and secondly, we need to remember that none of us minister to the highly-educated and fairly independent yuppies among whom Keller works. So, contextualising his approach to our own situations will be vital.

*Church for Every Context* by Michael Moynagh – another comprehensive work of missiology and ecclesiology, from a British author, looking particularly at Fresh Expressions of Church

*Ten Second Sermons* by Milton Jones – this book is not really anything to do with mission, but it is funny and thought provoking and will refresh weary ministers. It does actually contain some very profound thoughts on aspects of Christian life as well. For example “Churches are like helicopters – people don’t want to get too close in case they get sucked into the rotas.”