



God's Mission Has a Church

When my family moved to Austin, Texas, in the mid-1970s, one of the first things my parents did was look for a church. There was not much question about which church to attend; they were Episcopalians, so they looked for an Episcopal church. There was not even much question about which Episcopal church to attend; one attended the church closest to one's home. The first Sunday we were in town, that's what we did. Without much discussion, we joined the church and became faithful members. I attended Sunday school and youth group there; that church sent me to summer camp and awoke in me a sense of calling to the priesthood (which I didn't answer till many years later, but that's another story). My parents have now been faithful members of that church for forty years.

Back in the mid-1970s, that's what people did. Wherever you lived, you looked for the correct religious congregation to join according to your particular brand loyalty: Baptist, Methodist, Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Jewish, and so on. Outside of Christian and Jewish options, there weren't many; a few people didn't attend any particular church but still were able to name some sort of family affiliation. Whatever church you joined assumed that you had been a member of another church somewhere, and asked you to hand over your transfer papers so they could account for you properly. In

my cousins' Baptist church, they had regular altar calls and tracked who was "saved," but in the Episcopal church, people were baptized as infants, confirmed in the sixth grade, and assumed to be decent Christians thereafter. It was all very logical and orderly.

I don't have to tell you that's not how things work any more. A number of faithful Episcopalians still maintain their brand loyalty, but there are many more religious options than there used to be. One of the most popular options is "None," a preference adopted by increasing numbers of people, especially younger people. Gen-Xers and Millennials whose Boomer parents did not raise them in a church have little background in scriptural or religious knowledge, except what they read in the news—and that news is too often negative. What reason would they have for seeking out a church to add to their busy lives? School, sports, and scouting activities are ever more frequently scheduled on Sunday mornings, and parents gamely commit to them. People juggle frenetically busy schedules, and their spiritual lives fall into insignificance behind all the other priorities they try to meet. Faith, if they have it, often becomes distant background noise, recalled in times of trouble.

In the meantime, the world has gotten ever more confusing and complex. Futurist Bob Johansen says that we now live in VUCA world: a world of Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity.¹ Americans are no longer sure that they can count on the institutions of nation, religion, and society that once upheld our culture. Distrust of authority, conflicts over social issues, and scandals in some denominations have led many people to flee the churches they once filled. A church can no longer assume that it will have a certain market share of the population in any one place due to brand loyalty, nor can it assume that any Episcopalians who move into a neighborhood will join the closest Episcopal church. Episcopal churches once built their appeal on an "attractional" model that, in the worlds of the classic movie *Field of Dreams*, assumed that "If you build it, they will come." Those same churches are finding that the attractional model no longer brings people inside the church doors. They no longer come.

1. Bob Johansen, *Leaders Make the Future: Ten New Leadership Skills for an Uncertain World* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2012), 1.

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Yet God surely is still moving in our communities. Christ certainly still loves the religiously unaffiliated people who bustle down the streets, fill the coffee shops, beg on the street corners, crowd into the schools, and work in the restaurants, shops, and high-rise office buildings of our communities. The Holy Spirit without doubt is still at work to bring God's love to those who have no knowledge of it. God still has a mission in our land.

Like any organization, the church talks a lot about mission: What is the mission of the church? What is the mission of each congregation? It is essential for church planters and diocesan and denominational leaders to think and pray about the mission of new churches. Yet there is a growing understanding in the Christian world that the church doesn't have a mission—God has a mission, and God calls the church to join in what God is already doing. Darrell Guder says:

The ecclesiocentric understanding of mission has been replaced during this century by a profoundly theocentric reconceptualization of Christian mission. We have come to see that mission is not merely an activity of the church. Rather, mission is the result of God's initiative, rooted in God's purposes to restore and heal creation. "Mission" means "sending" and it is the central biblical theme describing the purposes of God's action in human history.²

It is because God has sent us that we gather in communities of faith where the gospel is preached, the sacraments are celebrated, and people are sent out to join in God's mission in our daily lives. The activities we do in church glorify God, strengthen Christians in discipleship, and nourish God's people, but true mission happens outside the church, and every Christian is a minister. The mission of the church is no longer "attractational"—seeking to bring people in, but "incarnational"—seeking to send people out.

This realization that God's mission happens in every part of life, not just in church, and certainly not just in the Episcopal Church, begs the question: Does God care about the number of people who attend worship each Sunday,

2. Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 4.

and how large our churches grow? Are growth and evangelism integral to the church's mission, or is our mission limited to social outreach work, or faithful worship, or serving the people we have already? Are attendance and membership numbers important at all?

Well, if not, the New Testament is curiously full of attendance and membership numbers. A quick perusal of the Acts of the Apostles shows the church growing by well-enumerated leaps and bounds, with large numbers of people responding to the apostles' proclamation of the good news of Christ. Luke, the author of Acts, eagerly counts the crowds who join in the apostles' teaching and fellowship. In fact, God's mission to reach many new people with Christ's love, and Christ's call to the church to join him in that mission, and the Holy Spirit's activity in empowering the church to do it, could not be any clearer than it is in the New Testament. God is on a mission to reconcile the world to God's self, and God calls the church to join in doing it. That is why the church exists, to do the things God is already working in the world to accomplish.

According to the Book of Common Prayer, "The mission of the church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ."³ This mission is very ambitious, to say the least—but if you're following the Son of God, miracles do happen. I believe this mission encompasses many aspects of church activity: from the forgiveness of sins (John 20:19–23), to proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:16–20), to helping the "least of these" (Matthew 25:40), to working with Christ for a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), to praying that the will of God be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10).

And surely this mission of reconciliation encompasses evangelism as well. In fact, I would argue that evangelism is what makes all these other missions possible, because committed disciples are the ones who do Christ's work in the world. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus's last words to his disciples are his command to go and make disciples:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son

3. Book of Common Prayer, 855.

and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Matthew 28:18–20

And in Acts 1:8, Luke describes what Jesus said to his disciples just before he ascended to heaven, commanding the disciples to share the good news: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Our existing churches are beautiful, faithful congregations of people. But that does not mean they are the only congregations Jesus wants us to create. Jesus told us clearly that we should not be satisfied in whatever comfortable Jerusalem we find ourselves in, but that we need to go out—to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth—to make disciples of all nations. The disciples we make do not have to be in foreign lands. They can be our neighbors, “Samaritans” who have never entered a church, but who are hungry for deeper spirituality, for the knowledge of Christ’s love.

In the Episcopal Church, many of us concentrate admirably on social justice and on bringing the kingdom of God to earth. I believe that this work is one good thing, but not the only thing we should be doing. Social justice work is entirely compatible with answering Jesus’s call to make new disciples. Helping people come to know Christ and grow in relationship with him gives them the gift of abundant, eternal life. Welcoming them into a community of faith that nourishes them with the sacraments, teaches them about Christ, and inspires them to live in Christ-like ways makes the kingdom of God a lived reality. Gathering them into churches helps marshal resources to help people in need. In fact, the church *must* make new disciples if we plan to do social justice work, help the poor, or transform unjust structures of society. This is long-term work, and it will require generations of disciples to do it.

Evangelism is what makes the mission of the church possible, and planting new churches is one important way to reach new people who will do this mission. Some of these new Christians will concentrate on social justice, and some will concentrate on teaching, or worshiping, or making new disciples. This is how it should be. The Holy Spirit gives all these gifts so that the church can accomplish its God-given mission of reconciling all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

Leadership Skills for a New Era

Bob Johansen, in his book, *Leaders Make the Future: Ten New Leadership Skills for an Uncertain World*,⁴ names ten leadership skills that he believes will be necessary to navigate a new VUCA world. The first three skills he names are the Maker Instinct, Clarity, and Dilemma Flipping.

The Maker Instinct, Johansen says, is something we all share—it is the desire to create new things. A Maker can be anyone from a woman creating beautiful quilts in the same way her grandmother used to do, to a digital native creating applications for the iPhone. But the leadership skill required for the future is not just the desire to create alone, but the ability to create in concert with others: to bring people into networks that build and grow things together. The process of building a team that in turn creates a new congregation is a vital skill in church planting, as we will discuss. I believe that not just individual Episcopal leaders, but also the Episcopal Church as a whole, must begin to recognize its divine calling to use the Maker Instinct to create new congregations of faith across the country. We must come together as an organization that recognizes its calling to join God in the divine mission of touching all people with God's love, and we must build the organizational structures and equip the leaders to make it possible.

Johansen defines the second leadership skill, Clarity, as the ability to

- see through messes and contradictions;
- make things as clear as they can be and communicate that clarity;
- see futures that others cannot yet see;
- find a viable direction in the midst of confusion;
- see hope on the other side of trouble.⁵

A church planter is a person who can look at a community and begin to dream, pray, and discern about what God is doing there and how a congregation might join God in that mission. A church planter sees clearly through confusion and ambiguity, to envision something that does not yet exist, and can communicate that vision to others so compellingly that others are inspired to join in making that vision a reality. This is a skill that the

4. Bob Johansen, *Leaders Make the Future: Ten New Leadership Skills for an Uncertain World*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2012).

5. *Ibid.*, 45.

Episcopal Church as a whole needs to cultivate. We need to discern where God is working in our communities and how we can join in that mission. We must begin to see clearly through all the confusion and ambiguity of church decline, to the mission that underlies everything the church does, and we must join together as a church-wide team to make God's vision a reality.

Dilemma Flipping may be the most important skill for us to cultivate in the Episcopal Church. The future, says Johansen, will be filled with dilemmas, which unlike problems, cannot be solved—only navigated in creative ways. He writes:

The dilemmas of the future will be more grating, more gnawing, and more likely to induce feelings of hopelessness. Leaders must be able to flip dilemmas around and find the hidden opportunities. Leaders must avoid oversimplifying or pretending that dilemmas are problems that can be solved. Dilemma flipping is a skill that leaders will need in order to win in a world dominated by problems that nobody can solve. . . . Dilemmas are often embedded with hope, even if the hope is hidden.

Dilemma flipping is reimagining an unsolvable challenge as an opportunity, or perhaps as both a threat and an opportunity. Dilemma flipping is the ability to put together a viable strategy when faced with a challenge that cannot be solved in traditional ways.⁶

I am not sure that any concept so clearly describes what we are facing in the Episcopal Church. Faced with declining numbers, we must decide whether decline is a problem or a dilemma. If it is a problem, we can solve it. However, I think it is a dilemma, and we need to navigate it. Our traditional ways of reaching people are no longer working as effectively, because the culture around us has shifted. We are not going to be able to manage the culture into a box that suits our traditional institutions. And we are not going to be able to solve the problem of shifting culture by doing what we are already doing, only working harder and better at it. Problem solving will not make the dilemma go away.

The challenge that faces the church is to begin to see the shifting culture not as a danger, but as an opportunity. We live in a post-Christendom world, which means that we must envision church mission in post-Christendom

6. *Ibid.*, 57, 59.

ways. If we can cultivate this fresh vision, if we can join the Spirit in the ongoing work of renewal, we can begin to navigate the church's dilemmas anew. Planting new churches is one way we can turn our dilemma into opportunity in the Episcopal Church. Some of the new churches will look quite traditional, though the very fact of newness requires them to "ask the key missional questions of identity and purpose that existing congregations often take for granted."⁷ Some new churches may look so different from the traditional model that other Episcopalians will look at them askance and wonder whether they are really Episcopal churches. Some of them will sing unfamiliar music and worship in new languages and minister to populations that are unprecedented in our church. All of them will be joining in a vital mission to live out Christ's reign on earth, through imperfect but lovely and faithful congregations of the Episcopal Church. 🌿

7. Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 161.