

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Mission Council Conference
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1. Introduction

In the UCCSA we used a framework of Mission which I wish to share with you here. It is a framework sometimes referred to as the five marks of mission. It was important for us because it is simple and could be understood by people even with very basic theological understanding. Using this framework, we created a *missional* manual for the local church called 'Tell me the old, old story.' It will be important for you to develop carefully selected resources that could be used by the different expressions of the church.

2. Telling the Story

Over generations we have pre-occupied ourselves with evangelism as the heart of our *missional* journey. Many have used the great commission text as a theological under-pinning of the evangelical approaches they have adopted. We need to re-read this text, especially that previously it was read and often used to buttress imperial interests. We have to understand again what Jesus meant when he sent his disciples out in the world with the words of the great commission.

I am glad that there are representatives of theological institutions at this retreat. In my experience most theological institutions and seminaries tend to focus their training on areas such as Systematic theology, Biblical studies, Pastoral care and Ecclesiastical History. My challenge to you is that perhaps you need to do an audit of your programmes with the view to identifying how much of our theological content in our seminaries is towards maintenance, and how much is *missional*. Do we do enough in preparing our ministers to have the skills to be engaged in crossing boundaries or is our training about shepherding those who are already within the church? The discipline of Missiology has to be introduced as a necessity if we are to develop creative and outward looking Christian leaders.

I want to invite you to look at the Lukan perspective on Jesus' commission which is in Acts 1:8:

⁸But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

I choose this text because I wish to insist on the need for us to be prepared to tell the gospel as life-giving, and not debilitating, denigrating, life-denying, and condemnatory as we have done in the past. The need to tell the good news of Jesus Christ is not optional, however, how do we do it in such a way that it is not alienating to others? It is important that we recognize what Jesus meant when he says 'you shall receive power,' which for me means adequately prepared. Our preparedness is both spiritual and theological. Like I said yesterday we need the skill to listen-in, tune into a spiritual frequency as well as be theologically equipped to share the gospel.

Perhaps we should consider developing a module on Mission and Partnership (or missional church) which can be done jointly by those interested who are partners through Common Global Ministries. This could be done online, weekly webinars, or those who are able to go on mission trips. I think we should be seeking ways that will stretch our imaginations and take us beyond our comfort zones.

3. Teaching and nurturing

One of the endangered species in the church today is the Sunday school teacher. I am what I am today because of the many Sunday school teachers who patiently helped us to fall in love with the gospel. At a very early age we were taught important concepts such as salvation, justice, fairness, equality and Christian conduct which shaped us as we grew into adulthood. I am convinced that we should invest more into the teaching ministry of the church.

One of the strengths of the Liberation theology communities in South America was what came to be known as the Base Ecclesial Communities. Here they were able to study the Bible together, reflect on their political situations and study the works of people like Paulo Freire, Gustavo Guitierrez and others. There are different expressions of this throughout the world, some call them small groups and others call them cell groups. However, the point is it has been proven beyond doubt that we need a mechanism through which the church can become a learning space.

The theological college that I lead at the moment is called Kgolagano College of Theological education by extension. Over the years its strength has been in offering theological training to both clergy and lay leaders through manual distance education. We have been able to equip hundreds of people through simple, inexpensive and accessible theological approaches. The *Missional* Church ought to invest in its leadership and that of necessity means making theological education accessible to all.

4. Tender and loving Service

I am convinced that the heart-beat of the gospel today is about enabling humanising relationships. In a world where the empire preaches polarization of people according to race, religion, class, sexual orientation and nationality the church has to offer the gospel as an antidote to such ideology of hatred and exclusion.

Our model of mission should be the incarnation which the Apostle Paul describes in his letter to the Philippians. He says;

⁵In your relationships with one another,
have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be
used to his own advantage;

⁷rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature^[b] of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁸And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

⁹Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father (2: 5-11).

I just think that *missional* church is about offering a new anthropology which is about embracing the other. It is the Indians who say *Namasthe*, which means "I see God in you," the Zulu say, *Sakubona* which means 'I see you' and in my language we say *dumela* which means 'Let's agree', as though to say 'Let's share the space', let's go together.' These are powerful expressions of acknowledging the divinity that is in every human being, irrespective of who they are, what skin colour they are and what religious affiliation they are. It seems to me there is so much we can learn from indigenous knowledge systems that can inform our theology.

The palliative activities of the church which include soup kitchens and shelters for homeless people are necessary. However, we need to equip ourselves to go beyond that by asking questions that will address structural injustice. We have to challenge the economic configurations that continue to benefit a small population of the world at the expense of the majority. I believe we cannot continue to preach 'fullness of life for all' or 'wholeness' or any of the missional priorities we are setting for ourselves without addressing the issue of economic injustice. And by the

way the World Communion of Reformed Churches has done some good work, especially through a document called the Accra Confession. The World Council of Churches has had what is called the AGAPE process which also addresses the dangers of neo-liberal economics and is searching for alternatives. The Council for World Mission initiated a process whereby they are seeking an alternative Economy. You don't have to re-invent the wheel because there are lot resources out there.

5. Transforming the World

Dr Sharon Watkins and I had the privilege of serving in the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches for seven years. In the WCC we dealt with many ecumenical and *missional* issues, which I believe ought to be part of our local agenda. Among the issues that we preoccupied ourselves with included the situation in Palestine. We had to deal with the continued denial by Israel and the USA of the people of Palestine the opportunity of statehood, the continued embezzlement of their land by Israel, the continuing attacks in the name of self-defence by Israel on their children and destruction of their infrastructure. We dealt with issues such as HIV and AIDS and how the poor in the South continue to be ravaged by this disease even though Anti-retroviral drugs have been around for close to two decades.

We discussed issues such as the war in the Sudan, the situation of indigenous communities around the world, racism, sexism and lots of other issues. We identified what were the life-denying issues across the world and studied them with the hermeneutical lenses of justice.

These are issues that the Christian Church should not avoid in its *missional* self-understanding. In the UCCSA we embarked on a programme through which we trained justice advocates across the denomination. The purpose was to create a critical mass that would be able to educate, *problematize*, speak to and on behalf of those in the margins as well as challenge the church to be true to its calling to justice and peace. We had developed a carefully structured programme that dealt with prejudice, patriarchy, internalized oppression and how our faith informs us in dealing with these matters.

6. Treasurer

The ecumenical movement has made critical contribution in the Conference of the Parties discussions on climate change. This is important and as stewards of God's creation we ought to develop theologies and a voice regarding climate change. Perhaps this is an area where Disciples of Christ could actively create partnerships with partners in the South. Climate change is a matter of global concern and there are opportunities for developing synergy in harvesting of water, making clean water accessible to poor communities, planting trees in the face of deforestation, promoting organic farming and other such *missional*

projects. It could also be an opportunity to engage in common advocacy against big multi-national corporations such as Monsanto who destroy local agriculture through their massive business models that impose genetically modified seeds.