

*Missional Congregations:
Towards Life-Affirming Communities Reflections on Our Journey*

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ABSTRACT

As General Secretary of the Council for World Mission, the author is instrumental in resourcing and building up congregations as missional communities. The article describes the qualities of missional congregations, the people who are involved in making them work, and their biblical foundations. It ends with a strategy for mission engagement that is rooted in God's work in local churches, and that is well informed and responsive to the real day to day concerns of their communities.

Considering Who We Are and What We Are About

There are three categories of people that I would like to call attention to as I present this reflection today:

1. **The pastor and people of congregations** who dare to claim that we are following Jesus, who walked the streets of Nazareth and identified with the needs of the people he met along the way. In that sense the pastor and people are on a journey together; living with others in a context of hurt and hope; struggling with the issues of dislocation; and searching for meaning and significance. The congregation's mission is to become a sanctuary of healing and hope for the disadvantaged and dispossessed; a voice of courage in the face of threat, discouragement and opposition; and a representation of Jesus Christ, in the midst of suffering and struggle. The real call is to become attuned to the context in which we find ourselves; attentive to the needs of the people around and among us; and affixed to the goal of the mission to which God has called us for such a time as this.
2. **Denominational leaders**, charged with responsibility to guide pastors into an appreciation of what it means to lead congregations to accomplish this goal. Leadership of congregations is a calling in its own right. Traditionally we have been taught that to lead a congregation is to maintain the institution, to grow numbers and to have a healthy financial status. The focus shifted long ago when postmodern philosophy and practice took over and institutional

loyalty lost its appeal. Individual interest and personal considerations now dominate the consciousness of most people and the Church must either respond or become extinct.

3. **Council for World Mission (CWM)**,¹ committed to working with denominational leadership, assisting them to lead the process by which congregations are helped to embrace the urgent call to become missional. CWM believes that it occupies a strategic global platform with thirty-one member denominations all over the world with 50,798 congregations and some 21,514,504 members. Think what a difference we could make if we were to take this mission of building life-affirming communities seriously. If 21.5 million people were to see church as more than a once a week gathering think what an impact we could have when we organise ourselves to pursue peace, live justly, rescue those who are perishing and walk humbly with our God.

I am addressing you as one who has had the privilege of serving from all three vantage points, and who is presently a member of a local congregation. I served as a local pastor, where the impulse of people's struggle and search for meaning was the foremost concern; I served as General Secretary of my denomination, The United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands,² at a time when we were concerned about the renewal and transformation of the Church and the need to have pastors change mind-set and come face to face with the real world; and I am now serving as General Secretary of CWM, where the cut and thrust of our priority is about working with our 31 member Churches to claim the possibilities and the prospects of an approach to ministry that is all-embracing, all-inclusive and need-appropriate. We call this thrust the building/developing of missional congregations towards life-affirming communities.

In addition to those three roles in which I have been privileged to serve, I am presently a member of a local congregation; I go to church every Sunday; and I am observing the church at work. I am not very active, I must admit, but very observant; because it is congregations like the one I attend that CWM is concerned about. And I assume that this is also a concern of this gathering. We are the people of God, in whatever role we serve; and we are the followers of Jesus Christ, called to participate in the suffering, struggle and groaning of a broken creation; and to be the 'light of the world and the salt of the earth' (Matt. 5.14-16), where we have lost moral direction and are groping in the dark.

¹ <http://www.cwmission.org>, accessed 30 December 2013.

² <http://ucjci.com>, accessed 30 December 2013.

An interest in and commitment to life-affirming communities constituted the hallmark of Jesus' mission, a mission in which the issues that affected individuals and communities became the heartbeat of his concern. To the one thrown out of the community, (John 9) on account of his healing and restoration to a position of liberation, with eyes to see and voice to speak, with courage and conviction, Jesus met him, opened the door to a new experience for him and declared for all to hear: 'I am come that you may have life in all its fullness' (John 10.10).³

*The Missional Congregation:
CWM' Priority towards Life-Affirming Communities*

I have chosen to focus my thoughts around the central priority of the Council for World Mission for this next period of our ministry. And I hope that my reflections on this subject will assist us all as we search for ways to be faithful in living out our calling. CWM believes that by developing missional congregations the church positions itself to participate in building life-affirming communities.

A Missional Congregation:

- Lives a spirituality of engagement, that is rooted (reflected) in (its) worship, and in the nurture and support of one another (its members). Such spirituality of engagement is born of the shared experience of those who worship together, discerning the will of God and supporting each other in their search for meaning. Such engagement is the outcome of life lived in the company of each other and in the presence of God, where there is fullness of joy and endless possibility for life of quality. Such engagement is the product of a community in worship and fellowship.
- Is attuned to the context in which it is set; alert to the needs of the communities of which it is apart; and attentive to the struggles and suffering of the marginalised and dispossessed people among them. It is not possible to be a missional church and ignore the pain and suffering of the people who live among us. The real tragedy that the story of the man who fell among thieves presented to us is that the worship of the priest, who passed by on the other side, did not inform his response to a suffering man lying half dead along a deserted road. Too often the our reflections, on this story, simply romanticize the noble deeds of the Good Samaritan, without taking note that the half dead man who would have died if everyone behaved like the priest or the Levite.

³ All Scripture references are to the New International Version unless otherwise stated.

- Works in partnership with others, because it understands that active partnership with other groups, who share similar concerns, is one of its greatest sources of strength. The general sentiment of the people on the street is that the church is one of the most arrogant, dogmatic and exclusive organisations in any community. If indeed this is how we are viewed by the community then it is time for us to take stock. The Rev. Dr Clinton Chisholm challenges the way we often behave as though we were a theocracy; and argues that 'Christians must, therefore, modify, not their commitment to God's Word or way, but their attitude towards and expectations of non-Christians'.⁴ Even this comment may be a little audacious for one to make about the Christian way of thinking about God's word; however, it is the attitude and expectations to which he speaks that I find helpful. The attitudes and expectations that we hold of others very often inhibit good working relationships towards harmony and solidarity. To be missional requires the church to place value on the gifts, experiences, expertise and passion of each other; so that together we may serve God's cause, work for justice and peace in the world and bring about healing and hope for all of God's creation.
- Is a learning community, in which people take seriously the reading of the Bible through the lenses of their own (and their reflection on their) experience, both as individuals and as a community; and relating the learning, from such an approach, to the ways in which we live with one another. By serious reading of the Bible I am inviting us to resist the temptation to read the Bible as a prescriptive text; rather it is a call to see the Bible as stories of human struggle, creation's groaning and God's interventions. When the Bible is so read to reveal the stories of its contexts; and when we allow our own experiences to enter into conversation with the words of scripture; then the Word of God comes alive, from the pages of scripture and informs our relationships and interactions. Rev Dr Dale Bisnauth⁵ was a Hindu who was converted to Christianity when he read the Gospel of Mark. He told us that something happened as he connected his experiences to the reading of the Gospel and the outcome was a change in perspective and direction for his life. Learning takes place when we are open to the revelations that come through our engagement with scripture and experience, trusting God to give light to our understanding. A

⁴ <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20130715/cleisure/cleisure4.html>, accessed 4 January 2013.

⁵ <http://www.kaieteurnews.com/2013/04/05/former-minister-dr-dale-bisnauth-passes-on>, accessed 4 January 2013.

missional congregation is a learning community that takes the experiences of its people and the words of scripture seriously.

Congregations are located in the context of community life. In communities we experience a variety of situations in which the ambiguities, anxieties and aspirations of people surface; and our capacity to cope proves inadequate. Often on the brink of frustration, overcome with fear and traumatised by feelings of failure, we watch as whole communities disintegrate, rendering everyone helpless and hopeless. Marriages break up and family life becomes dysfunctional; self-interest dominates negotiations and selfishness blinds our eyes to the injustices around us and in which we are involved; corruption rears its ugly head and decent people get trapped in the vice of greed; and competition robs the world of cooperation and destroys community. It is in the midst of such circumstances that the church is called to exercise ministry and to carry out the mission of God.

It is impossible to be the church without an awareness of the context; to do so is to be no more than a 'noisy gong- hiding behind the pulpit, with sweet-sounding platitudes but very distant from the world' (see 1 Cor. 13.1-3). Of such James asks, about a brother or sister who is hungry, 'if one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill." And yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?' (James 2.16) Awareness leads to action; because awareness stirs us to compassion and compassion moves us to action.

A church with the awareness of its context learns how to hold the hand of the stranger in whatever form that stranger is presented; how to stand in solidarity with the vulnerable and downtrodden; and how to be a friend and companion to the lonely, the fearful and the socially excluded. We learn to understand the struggle of the wanderer, the heartaches of the single parent, the anguish of the orphaned, the crisis of separation and divorce, the loneliness of those living with a disability, the pain of poverty and the humiliation of failure. An aware church is a church that knows what is going on around it and is caring enough to respond by doing something about it. That is what it means to be missional and that is the heartbeat of evangelism in the truest sense of the word; because evangelism is the good news of God's presence and God's salvation activity among us.

A Biblical Paradigm for the Church's Mission

There are many biblical examples of the church at work in community. I have chosen to call attention to Luke's account of the Early Church as recorded in Acts of the Apostles 2 and 4. I have chosen these two brief

accounts because they are loaded with a graphic account of how the church understood its mission in the context of community.

The Fellowship of the Believers – Acts 2.42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

In Chapter 2 the church is seen to be dedicated to worship as that which informs the community and inspires it to act with love and caring concern with and for the community. Worship is more than singing songs, dancing to good music; and it is far more than a feel-good exercise. According to William Temple:

To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God. All this is gathered up in that emotion which most cleanses us from selfishness because it is the most selfless of all emotions – adoration.⁶

I like this definition because it makes God the centre of our worship and connects the worshippers with the purpose of God in an act of total surrender and selfless devotion. To be missional, therefore, is to be a worshipping community, a community that takes seriously teaching and fellowship; the breaking of bread and prayer; and ways to encourage, even cultivate, gladness and sincerity of hearts in the offering of our praise to God.

The Believers Share Their Possessions – Acts 4.32-37

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

⁶ William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London: MacMillan, 1934).

In Chapter 4 the church was so connected in spirit and purpose that they regarded all they had, all their resources, as gifts from God to be used for the common good.

There was no needy person among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

This is a transformative moment in the life of any community. People gave according to their means and others received according to their needs. They saw and responded to the needs of each other such that no one had any lack because there was more than enough for everyone.

So today I call the churches to rediscover and reclaim their missional role in community. It is a role that is grounded in our relationship with God, our worship of God and our living out of the purpose of God, giving concrete expression to our worship, in community. It is from this kind of missional engagement that CWM believes life-affirming communities can be built.

The Strategy for Missional Engagement

Culturally-Informed Ministerial Formation – Preparing Socially-Conscious Leaders for the Social Context of Our Mission

Ministers of Religion occupy one of the most influential podiums for social transformation in all of society. Think for a moment that every week we have a captive audience, a group of people hungry for a word from the Lord, a word that makes sense to their social circumstances; to their economic challenges, their child living with a disability, the recent discovery that a family member has HIV/AIDS, the shock that a spouse is unfaithful, the News that Government will once again raise taxes and the devastation of yet another cyclone, hurricane or flood.

In the congregations we pastor and the communities we serve are people begging for just a little of our time, that is real time, time for honest engagement, for thoughtful conversation, for researched opinions or perspectives and for candid acknowledgement that we do not have all the answers. People are there ready to walk with us, to sit at our feet and share our space, if we would but keep it real – away with the mystique and just be real.

Theological education must therefore be intentionally skewed towards ministerial formation that enables the pastor to keep it real, to relate to the real world and in so doing debunk the myth that God is at a distance.

Missional congregations will only take shape when those who lead them are prepared, theologically for the social context.

Context Reading and Mission Framing – Seeking to Understand What Is Going On, Where is God at Work and What Does the Lord Require of Us?

If it is true that in 50 years the whole country of Kiribati will be under water, then that is a mission issue for the CWM member Church in that context. If it is true that almost five hundred people (467 to be exact) have committed suicide in Singapore during 2012 then that is a mission issue for our member Church in Singapore. If it is true that more boys and men are killed in Jamaica than are killed in the Afghanistan war, over the same period of time, then that is a mission issue for our member Church in Jamaica. If it is true that our European member Churches have declined in membership by 26% over the last ten years (Congregational Federation – 23%) then that is indeed a mission issue for our member Churches in Europe.

My point is that our context informs our mission and therefore a proper reading of that context is critical to the way mission is developed and how it unfolds. God, in reading the context of Israel in Egypt, said: 'I have seen...I have heard, I have observed...and I am concerned' (Exod. 3.7-8). Jesus, in reading the context of the Capernaum region, and seeing how the people were 'harassed and helpless', was 'moved with compassion' and said: 'The harvest truly is plenteous but the labourers are few' (Matt. 9.35-37).

Missional congregation as a concept, therefore, is about having a proper understanding of the social context within which we do ministry; and developing a plan of action, informed by that reading, as the basis for engaging with community. Such an engagement allows us to connect with people, meet needs, respond to issues of injustice, hold perpetrators of violence accountable, walk alongside the vulnerable and dislocated, bring hope to the despondent and join others in pursuit of the experience of fullness of life for all.

Capacity Development Programme – Equipping the Whole People of God for Mission in the Times and Places in which We Live and Minister

Capacity is the power of choice, the ability to manage one's affairs successfully; the inspiration that leads one to make decisions that can mobilize the interest of sceptics and withstand the scrutiny of critics; and the insight and energy combined to make things happen, movements progress, communities come to life and sustainability guaranteed through the passage of time. Capacity is the sum total of an individual's or organisation's outlook, ingenuity, determination and mettle. Capacity development, therefore, is the means by which that which lies dormant or untapped is eked out and engaged for the good of

one's own wellbeing or an organisation's creative engagement and cumulative impact. It is here that the church can make a big difference in people's lives and in freeing people to do God's mission. If you want the question 'where do we go from here?' answered then I suggest to you that the answer is in capacity development towards missional engagement.

The United Nations Development Programme defines capacity development as 'the process through which individuals, organizations, and societies obtain, strengthen, and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their own development objectives over time'.⁷ CWM shares this definition; and we are developing it further to fit in our unique context. 'We are called to partnership in Christ to mutually challenge, encourage and equip churches to share in God's mission'.⁸ This, in essence, speaks to 'building and developing' each other's abilities and capacities so that we can withstand the diverse challenges in our contexts and be able provide leadership and inspiration to a battered and broken community in which we live and do God's mission. We are interested in eking out untapped potential for the creative engagement and cumulative impact of the church in community.

CWM places Capacity Development Programme at the heart of our priority to assist member Churches to build missional congregations; because we believe that each member Church is as strong as its weakest congregation and that CWM, itself, is as strong as its weakest member. Capacity Development is endogenous. It comes from within the community and it is distinguished by the will to stand stronger against its challenges and to accomplish more for its people. Capacity development is that process through which we are endowed with that growing resilience and faith in communities to achieve their strategic goals and set new ones while working in partnership to strengthen and encourage each other along the way.

Conclusion

I am addressing my colleagues in ministry at this conference. It is a privilege and an honour to do so because I believe we are all in the business of seeking to understand how God works in community and what God requires of those who share in God's mission in the world. I believe that I am right in assuming that you share my concern, and

⁷ http://www.unpcdc.org/media/8651/pn_capacity_development.pdf, accessed 4 January 2013.

⁸ 'Mission in the Context of Empire: CWM Theological Statement 2010', <http://www.cwmission.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/CWM-Theology-Statement-2010-final.pdf>, pg. 3, accessed 4 January 2013.

that of CWM, that mission void of context is far too arrogant, presumptuous and, consequently, irrelevant.

The question for us to think about today is: where to go from here? I suggest that we must ask ourselves this question: What do we really know about our community, the community in which we are called to do ministry? And what are we doing about that which we know? A serious wrestling with these questions locates us near to the heart of God and opens the eyes of our hearts to the possibilities of a mission that can truly breathe life into community. So I suggest that we ask the hard questions, do the research, analyze the information available to us, take hold of the rod that us in our hands and go forward with God to make a difference in our world.