

The Church of the Future: Missional Communities

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The title to this brief article may be more a hope than a statement of fact, but as a visionary, I feed off the hope of a preferable future. In my daily walk with Jesus, I often cling to the prayer of Paul found in Romans 15:13 – *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

In an evangelistic sense, I am not overly alarmed. God has always raised up an effective apologetic for his sovereign plan to save the world through Jesus. The Holy Spirit communicated powerfully through his servants in pre-modern and modern times. I believe he will do so in postmodern/post-Christian times as well. Actually, rather than alarmed, I feel a great sense of expectancy to see what God will do to speak to both social critics and the Church. Christianity may be under fire, but opponents, pundits and the loyal opposition ought to all beware of writing God or the church off too soon. The future is securely in his hands!

I must, for my own sanity and confidence (and I really do), believe God has a plan for the Church in the transitional period we live in. His Word assures us that everyone will one day witness God's saving work on behalf of his creation. In fact, his loving grace is so irresistible, Isaiah compares it to "rushing torrents of water."

Is. 59:19 – ... men will fear the name of the Lord, and from the rising of the sun, they will revere his glory. For he will come like a pent-up flood that the breath of the Lord drives along.

When God plans and then determines to do good, no philosophical or societal resistance matters. When he finally decides to act — Everyone...*Look Out!*

Rom. 8:31, 35, 37-39 What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

As a passionate participant in (and observer of) the Church, I see God raising up 'missional communities' that can influence 'from the margins.' I can't remember where I first heard the term 'missional communities', or I'd give the person credit. But the picture it paints in my mind is a group of people who are highly intentional about truly obeying Jesus' commands so as to increasingly be like him. The **individuals** pursuing this life-goal are in **community**. They live out their new, loving, powerful kingdom reality not as 'Lone Ranger Christians' (going about their work-a-day life isolated except for an hour on Sunday), but non-negotiably as a vital part of a group of Christ-followers.

An additional key attitude is that this Christ-imitating community does not 'have a mission.' A mission 'has them!' They are in the grip of God's sovereign eschatological plan to redeem mankind! 'Mission,' 'missions' or evangelism could **never** become a 'department' in this kind of church, nor could it ever be given to a committee! Hence, I see these emerging churches as 'missional-communities.' The two cannot be separated.

This is not new. It is a **renewal**. However unevenly, for 2000 years the Church, when it is at its best, has existed as a missional community. This is Christian life that marries conformity to Christ's clear teachings (discipleship) to Christ's mission (evangelism).

The Christ-followers I envision in these missional communities would not be content if they yielded to 'consumer Christianity.' No, they are bond-slaves in the Lamb's war. They want to be a part of winning for him the rewards of his sufferings.

Look out world, the Church thrived best when it was least inclined to accommodate culture. I am not afraid of being on society's margins. What we should appropriately fear is how the Church will respond on the margins. Will she be defensive? Combative? Reactionary? I have confidence that the young leaders I know will rediscover a pre-Constantine form of Christian life.

The missional churches of the future will thrive, then, under God's commands and through his power. God will give them love for society, a gentle love that winsomely leads others to Christ in a way that is appropriately responsive to the shifts in human experience that we see all around us.

Thank God that our history in the Vineyard makes it relatively easy for us to experience God's leading and then to hear his voice and risk. It keeps us from being too rigid to respond to his Spirit or to change approaches as he dictates. This **faith** part of our genetic code, our highly participative and experimental worship (letting the Holy Spirit be the administrator/leader of the church), our belief in the nearness of God's kingdom (and its attendant power, rule and reign), our comparatively young leaders and our focus on healing – all these existing under the Authority of Scripture – leads me to

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believe that by God's grace, the Vineyard can thrive in the realities of the new millennium