

BEING MISSIONAL

BY LISA M. HESS

A missional church offers the key to a plausibly “post-Christian” era, say many theologians and church leaders (see Darrell Guder, ed. *Missional Church*, Wm B. Eerdmans, 1998). Instead of the church sending missionaries, a missional church recognizes itself to be sent by God to participate in God’s mission as it will be found. Note the open-ended language and future-oriented prose. The gospel is continually renewed, yet always of God. Mission is the consistent task of God’s called people, yet it will be found anew within future horizons by means of learned, shared discernment. Missional rests on cultural sensitivity, faithful humility, primary relationality, and a presumed presence of God in the interactions to come. Somewhat neglected in this literature, a lived missional identity also requires an affective wisdom lived within a globalizing culture completely predisposed against it. My ruminations in this article explore what a lived missional identity in the Spirit’s holy havoc might look like.

Living a Missional Identity

New Zealand author Mike Brantley offers a concise and very recent commentary on living a missional identity in his context of Wellington, New Zealand (see “The Fragrance: The Missional Church in c./21” in *Stimulus*, Vol. 13 No. 2, May 2005). Facing a “postmodern, post-Christian society [that] is predisposed against anything that smells of our cultural past, including Christianity and its morality,” we must be willing, Brantley argues, to engage a paradigm shift away from the familiar. We must depart from a Sunday-centric church. We must pursue Jesus, not an ideology in his name. We must “smell like Jesus,” or embody his radical compassion and hospitality. We must “be a tribe” that lives an interdependent intimacy with the living Christ. Evangelism must become the service of real needs,

such as food, clothing, shelter. And we must be intentional with our resources, including time and money. All are practical steps in “being missional.”

The Power of Relationship

Yet much of the national, cosmopolitan culture on the North American continent is simply not predisposed to a primarily relational, humble, compassionate service of the unknown other. Capitalism and market competition dissuade against such relational skills. Specialization and professionalization dehumanize the expert as one offers authoritative guidance in her or his respective field(s), often at minute, yet habituating, costs to her or his own shared humanity.

In the words of Rachel Naomi Remen, “Relationship-centered care in today’s culture is truly an act of courage, [for] ours is not a compassionate culture. We’re a frontier culture [that] values self-sufficiency, competence, independence... Our culture values mastery and control. And of course the shadow of a culture like this is a profound isolation from human wholeness and intimacy” (“The Power of Relationship,” key-note address, 1998 Relationship-Centered Care Gathering). So much of North American cultural interaction neglects a relationship of mutuality between fellow human beings as they are and apart from what they do.

The lived expectations and skills of healthy interpersonal relationships are eroding in our polarized, fragmenting communities. The need for an affective wisdom within religious communities is growing. In a media-saturated, virtual world, we mistake sex for love, security for intimacy, and change for death. Yet spiritual and physical hunger increases, hopelessly fed by consumer strategies and seductive marketing for purchased integrity. We may identify the cognitive and practical steps needed to become a missional people of God, yet how do we

engage this pattern as we grow more and more unaccustomed to spiritually intimate relationships in a polarizing and fragmented culture?

Relationships are not systematic, nor are they transparent to analysis – even by those participating – yet those seeking a deeper sense of connection, those willing to risk new behaviors beyond old systems, do learn from others’ experiences. There is also much wisdom to be had in well-bounded, trained clinical pastoral education that pushes invulnerable practices of ministry toward authentic, pastoral identities through which fellow human beings participate in relational care and healing compassion. What follows is a little bit of both – personal experience and clinical training – for whatever it may be worth.

Holy Friendship

Spiritual intimacy upon which a missional identity may grow requires reliance upon an engaged, Spirit-centered, shared practice of some sort with at least one other person (prayer, hospitality, study, Sabbath observance, service). The “one other” or small group of faithful seekers requires personal participation, in contrast to many larger gatherings where persons may hide from revealing engagement.

This vehicle of “holy friendship” offers opportunity for a continually renewed trust lived over time; a measured, healthy vulnerability in self-disclosure; and a Spirit-directed love of the other that fuels self-sacrificial yet joyful service. Even more concretely, such compassionate companionship requires intentionality – regular times of embodied gathering, attentiveness, and prayer. Small-group ministry offers its heritage here, certainly, yet I urge a statement of commitment or covenant between holy companions where holy intentions may be articulated, honored, celebrated. Along with Mary Hunt, I am beginning to

wonder whether spiritual friendship is a better frame for understanding family than current family idolatries.

Brantley's trajectories of missional identity can be fleshed out in this holy friendship, reliant upon its own affective wisdom founded in God, for God's mission. For instance, in order to depart from a Sunday-centric church, one's discipleship must become ordinary and habitual, not sacred and occasional; spiritual instinct, not cognitive duty; lived friendship, not ritual community.

This lived relationship also grows compassion for others you'd least expect. Instead of ritual and liturgy, "church" becomes the practice and timbre of daily relationships you allow into your ordinary life, quirks and all. Being missional in this paradigm requires an openness to relationship of indeterminate quantity and quality, regardless of belief or political stance. It also requires flexibility of time and emotion, or living life by relationship, not by calendar or Blackberry. In this unconditional love, God is present and daily life proclaims it.

Wholeness and Intimacy

The pursuit of Jesus, or "smelling like Jesus" as we participate in his radical compassion and hospitality (as Brantley means it), embodies a primarily relational, compassionate intimacy that changes everything and reorients one's life. It requires a vulnerability to the other that is strong only in hindsight. The deeply life-giving intimacy sustained by such a love affair also flows into "being a tribe," "serving real needs" in intentional discipleship. The pursuit of Jesus in an intimate relationship or "love affair" like this differs from spoken proclamation or theological ideology. Such a "love affair" would seem easy within an oversexed, media-driven culture, yet this kind speaks to the very heart of humanity from the very heart of God.

Within the cultural shadow that eclipses wholeness and intimacy behind competence and independence, such intimacy with the living Christ is definitely terrifying, even as it quenches the existential thirst inherited by each of us. We consider Jill, a very scared and thirsty girl facing a deliciously bubbling stream, pre-

sided over by the lion Aslan of Narnia:

"Are you not thirsty?" he asks [her].

"I'm dying of thirst," said Jill.

"Then drink," said the Lion.

"May I – could I – would you mind going away while I do?" said Jill... "Will you promise not to – do anything to me, if I do come?" "I make no promise," said the Lion (C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair*, pp. 16-17).

For most contemporary, religious communities, ideology and its proclamation is much safer than a relational encounter with "the least of these" in whom we meet the risen Christ. Theo-

logical ideologies make the claims on us that we allow. Trouble is, we also miss the unspeakable joy that nurtures and fosters compassion beyond our ken.

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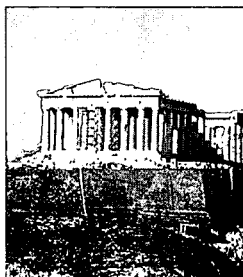
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