

AN INVITATION
TO
PARTNER IN MISSION

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Establishing a Missional Church

The local church is called to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to the surrounding community and the world. An outworking of this call has at least two major expressions: an unbridled love for God and a tangible love for others. Upon these two pillars, a church positions itself to be missional. God's general revelation to humankind in the creation and God's specific revelation in the Word summon a visceral response, calling everyone to worship their Creator; subsequently, this worship motivates us to share God's revelation with others out of gratitude for God's love and in obedience to Christ's mandate to make disciples. The local church of called-out saints provides a conduit whose missional mandate is to love God and love people. Unlike the ever-changing culture of the day, which is becoming more and more diverse, the church's mission is constant and foundational: to impact lives transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Gospel and the teaching of the Word of God!

The process of establishing a missional church includes a way of structuring its ministries for maximum impact. This will be the theme of this paper. Whether an existing congregation or a new church start, the following template may be adapted to apply to any setting. How does the local church cast a vision with a missional focus to meet the variety of needs of those in its community? I offer seven major pieces to consider in erecting a ministry infrastructure, each with an evangelistic emphasis. They are: an exegesis of the community, a quality worship experience, neighborhood small groups, restoration resources, an equipping school of ministry, a disciple-making training program, and tangible, hands-on mission projects. Before considering each of these pieces, I want to lay a foundation which is Biblically and philosophically cogent.

Though the well-known motto "*making disciples for the transformation of the world*"¹ may

¹ Brian O. Sigmon, ed., *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*. (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), ¶ 120, 93

have become trite for the average clergy person, it is nonetheless succinct and on point. My observation is that we, as Methodists, have succeeded in crafting a wonderful statement of mission but continue to struggle to implement a simple pathway which yields increasing fruitfulness beyond our present experiences. Vision must always be accompanied by implementation. Philosophically, the epistemological is unveiled in the ethical. The writer of the book of Acts describes a sense of this correlation. *“In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.”*² Notice Dr. Luke says Christ *“did and taught”*. The church leaves undone a major component of its overall mission as an equipping center should it engage primarily as a gathering center. We must do and teach! Preach and practice! Worship and walk! This is Christ’s way and, by design, it is to be our way. What might this pathway of discipleship look like as it leads toward the goal of our mission?

The following template for organizing these ministries will address issues facing many churches experiencing decline due to prevailing social and economic diversity. It may also serve as a guide for the establishing of new works of ministry. In this sense, it is general. However, for illustrative purposes, it will be germane to my own ministry appointment. The timeliness of this writing assignment and the need to communicate with our leadership and congregation are serendipitous. Ours is a great church filled with faithful, exuberant, Spirit-filled saints hungering for a move of God and longing to be used for maximum impact in the kingdom! It is also a church which is thirsty for a clear sense of mission. There are a number of vital, life-changing ministries in place which engage in healing and wholeness. A result is a desire for more of God and a sense that God has

² Acts 1:1-2 NRSV.

more to bestow as our faithfulness is demonstrated. Our discipleship pathway culminates with a goal of becoming a healthy, happy, holy church engaged in mission as an international center for Christian discipleship.

Before any note is sung or any word preached, an analysis of the community will serve to educate denominational leadership and appointed clergy as to the demographics of current and potential congregants. This exegesis of the area should highlight strengths and expose weaknesses that the ministries of the local church may address. Social, economic, educational, cultural, language, life-stage, and population data ought to be informative in giving a clear picture of the community. This data may be found through denominational resources, as well as, city and educational institutions. In my setting, this information paints a picture of our city as a multi-cultural Mecca, due, in large part, to the existence of a first-class university. The school attracts some of the brightest students from around the world. It is, therefore, not a leap to say we desire our church to be *An International Center for Christian Discipleship*. As such, we are working to staff our leadership teams with individuals who represent this multi-cultural setting. Here is an axiom to consider: a church must staff according to the people it wants to reach. An all Anglo staff in an African-American community makes no sense. Neither would the inverse. A burgeoning Hispanic community will resonate with a pastor who is Hispanic. A list of examples could go on. I am praying our church will eventually have a considerable number of pastors representing vastly different ethnicities to address specific needs of each culture, while at the same time, demonstrating a coming together of all these groups in a worship service that looks like heaven. “*After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.*”³ One of the wonderful things about our current church attendance is that we have folks from all around the world: Germany, the

³ Revelation 7:9 NRSV.

Caribbean, Mexico, Romania, Korea, Nigeria, Puerto Rico, New Guinea, African-Americans, and Hispanics whose roots are from many of the twenty-two Spanish-speaking countries in the world. Hallelujah! This phenomenon finds historical support within the Protestant missions movement. “*The Danish-Halle mission exported the Reformation ideals of vernacularization to a nonwestern culture...with missionaries who believed in the power of the gospel in people’s own language to save them for heaven, and to improve life on earth.*”⁴ Having done an exegesis of congregation and community, pastor and leadership can focus on the next step of the pathway.

For many years, my wife and I had the privilege of serving in the Rocky Mountain region of the Southwestern United States. Trails were abundant. Hiking those trails became a wonderful way to experience God’s beauty and provide a healthy outlet for physical exercise. Many trails were well-marked and usually included a beginning point called the trailhead. I would like to use this analogy of a trail to speak of a pathway of discipleship.

The trailhead for the local church is its weekly worship experience. The gathering of the redeemed on a regular, weekly basis gives voice to one of the two missional pillars spoken of at the beginning of this work. The admonition to love God with all of our hearts, souls, minds, and strength finds expression in the worship services of the local church. This is a starting point. The adventure called discipleship begins its pathway at the trailhead of worship. It is the church’s best opportunity to witness corporately to the love of God which has been shed abroad in the grateful hearts and changed lives of gathering believers. It behooves the church to do this activity well. When an

⁴ Dana L. Robert, *Christian Mission. How Christianity Became a World Religion.* (U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 42.

individual takes the initiative to make their way to any church, there must be a system in place to demonstrate “*radical hospitality*”⁵ with “*open hearts, open minds, open doors.*”⁶

From the greeters in the parking lot and entry doors until the final note is sung or the benediction is given, this guest from the community ought to sense they have been accepted as they are. Our weekly gathering strives to offer authentic worship music presented with excellence and skillfulness; practical, biblically-based sermons which engage a multi-generational, multi-cultural family of faith; a welcoming space with adequate seating; a clarity in sound and lighting; all these elements come together to make this first step on the path to discipleship a good beginning. Here in this setting, one of the church’s main missions is demonstrated for the world to see and hear. As the Gospel is preached, as God’s people praise and pray, a seeking soul is invited to join a local band of pilgrims called the church through the ministry of evangelism. Volumes of books exist to help churches in this area of worship. I would personally recommend the book entitled *Vertical Church*⁷ by James MacDonald.

It has been said relationship is one of the greatest words in the English language. Wrapped up in the concept of relationship is a way to view all of the important constructs of life. Our relationships to God, others, family, community, society, country, and the world are the stuff of daily living. A key to happiness is to have a healthy connection with others. This sense of community staves off loneliness and helps a person develop inter-personal skills which encourage positive self-worth. A place to belong and connect can be like the hiker who encounters places along the mountain trail where they can pause, rest, and take in the beauty of the scenery. There might be a bench, a stump, or

⁵ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 11.

⁶ United Methodist Communications © 2018.

⁷ James MacDonald, *Vertical Church*. (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, Publisher, 2012).

a log upon which to sit and commune with nature. This connection is life-giving. Such is the hope for next part of the journey into community.

Most of us live situated within the neighborhoods of the city. Unfortunately for many, we have not taken the time nor demonstrated the initiative to reach out and connect with our neighbors. For many of us, our journey will stall here simply because we do not recognize the need to live in community. Assuming there is a willingness to continue on the pathway, all persons attending church services will be encouraged to participate in neighborhood small groups. What could that small group look like? There are two logistical considerations and four ministerial goals in the establishment of these neighborhood outposts which extend the ministry of the church beyond the four walls.

Two things can be done to jumpstart this next piece. First, it can be established where everyone lives by taking the databases of the current membership and attendees and mapping them according to elementary school boundaries. This organizing principle is important because, as time goes by, each small group will be encouraged to adopt the elementary school in which they reside and perform regular acts of mission and service. This configuration will guide the formation of the groups, suggesting the number of groups and leadership to be required. Each group ought to provide room for an average of twelve, allowing for our neighbors who have yet to join, our constituency, and the hosts and shepherd-leaders. Folks who are willing to open their home may not feel comfortable in leading the group. These may host. While those who may be willing to lead may not have a home they deem to be suitable for hosting. These may lead. In a perfect world, shepherd-leaders could host too. Using these parameters, a small group could begin with four to six, add another six to eight neighbors, and be near capacity in short order. It is important to understand that each group is designed to replicate. Once the group grows beyond maximum limits, it splits and creates a new small group. This poses a challenge when relationships grow stronger over time. No one wants to necessarily leave and the group may not want to grow by making room for others. These two strains upon the small group must

constantly be buffeted or else it will become insular and ingrown, crippling the purpose of outreach to others. Another aspect of cultivating members to these groups is dependent upon reaching out to the neighbors to the north, south, east, and west of the host home. Since the groups will meet once a month, neighbors can be invited over for a gathering of friends. There need not be an overt spiritual curriculum employed for these initial gatherings. My contention is at some time or another, God will be mentioned in casual conversation. We should be sensitive to the leading of God's Spirit, ready to bear witness to our faith. An initial goal of fellowship will suffice. What unfolds next will look like the following.

The human condition includes experiences of joy: a wedding, the birth of a baby, an anniversary celebration, a birthday, a graduation, a winning season, a retirement, etc. as well as, the enduring of the pain of illness, a hospital stay, a death in the family, or a tragic accident. At these moments, congregants and neighbors alike will need all the support and comfort we can offer. Having developed relationships with these folks, we can be used of the Lord to minister the love of God as a neighborhood missionary. The gift of presence is beautiful and deeply meaningful. Each set of shepherd-leaders will have been trained to facilitate four ministerial giftings: assimilation, pastoral care, evangelism, and discipleship. The shepherd-leaders need not be personally gifted in each area but can establish a group dynamic which allows for these four specific ministries. God can endow the members of the group with the things needed to offer God's love.

Allow me to illustrate an example of assimilation. A visitor comes to church and fills out a connect card, granting the privilege of a contact address. The Director of the Neighborhood Small Group Ministry locates the address on a map. It is discovered this person lives two doors down from one of the small groups of the church. The name and address are forwarded to the shepherd-leader who generates a "thank you for coming" card, including an invitation to the next home group meeting. A second visit by this guest could include a "welcome" bag with information about the church's

ministries and another invitation to the small group. Only God knows what might happen when we, the church, have demonstrated faithfulness to the mission of reaching out.

What would pastoral care look like? Consider this example. It is discovered that either constituent or neighbor is taken ill. Hot soup will go a long way to heal the body and feed the soul. Perhaps mowing their lawn while they are under the weather or running to the store for medicine or groceries would demonstrate a sincere concern. How about a celebration? A bag of diapers for a new baby or a happy birthday balloon and cupcake would mean a lot. We can be creative.

How about evangelism? How to share the simple Gospel in a sincere, uncomplicated manner is part of the equipping of a shepherd-leader. Concurrently, working to equip every believer with how to share their faith is part of our mission! I recommend *May I Ask You A Question?*⁸ by Evantell Ministries. Becoming well-versed in this Gospel presentation will give greater confidence in the joy of witnessing. When conversations about Jesus come up, and I guarantee they will, a clear and intelligent presentation may yield bountiful spiritual fruit.

Finally, consider the aspect of discipleship. By God's grace, we trust someone will make a profession of faith as a result of our ministry. Having experienced spiritual birth, the duty becomes ours to mentor and train, teach and equip the new believer with the tools and skills necessary to blaze a trail along the pathway. Once again, training leadership is critical to the success of this mission. The piece that follows addresses this training, but before leaving this part of the discussion, let us review the steps in this piece by including the perspective of expanding the outreach of pastor and church. Let it be said the pastor is one person. She or he does not live where we live; work where we work, have the same neighbors as we do, shop where we shop, in every part of the city and all at the same time. The role of the pastor is extended through the work of the small group ministry. By extension,

⁸ R. Larry Moyer, *May I Ask You a Question?* (Dallas: Evantell, Inc., 1973).

we assimilate, we care for, we evangelize, and we disciple those he or she cannot by virtue of being one person. It is appropriate to mention the title of the first book I read upon beginning the journey toward licensing and ordination years ago: *The Christian as Minister*.⁹ We are all called to ministry and to the mission of God.

We have assessed our ministry setting; we have worked to have a meaningful weekly worship experience, and we have sought a way to connect with our neighbors. What is next along the pathway?

Analyzing the data from our research, we discover obvious needs. The weaknesses of humankind's sinful propensities cause many to struggle with debilitating issues. Perhaps a death or divorce has occurred, a battle rages with alcohol addiction or substance abuse, or someone has been released from prison, whatever the issues, help is needed. The church must find ways to restore lives shattered by circumstance, victimization, or poor choices. Each of the things mentioned are part of our own church and ministry setting. God has been good to lead our people into a number of restoration ministries which address these real-life scenarios. For over fifteen years, the *Divorce Care* ministry of our church has ministered to thousands experiencing the pain and heartache of divorce. A new ministry called *The Nest* is helping those who are fighting addictions to meth and other harmful chemical substances. *Celebrate Recovery* and *Alcoholics Anonymous* give much needed moral and spiritual support to overcome addiction. Our *Kairos* ministry reaches out to the incarcerated and works to bridge the gap once an inmate is out of prison. Partnering with *Save Our Streets* ministry, children, youth, and adults are helped to come out of a gang lifestyle and all of its collateral damage. These missional ministries evangelize through intervention and restoration and must be provided for the pilgrim along the pathway.

Our next step along the pathway is focused “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for

⁹ Robert F. Kohler and Joaquin Garcia, editors. *The Christian As Minister*. (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2001).

*building up the body of Christ”*¹⁰ through our *School of Ministry*. Believing God has gifted the Body of Christ with spiritual gifts, our church is seeking to employ their use for the benefit of all. This school functions as a teaching and equipping center as those gifted among us lead in prayer, prophecy, deliverance, evangelism, discipleship, doctrine, exploring membership, and worship. Classes are offered year-round, seasonally, and by appointment. Classes conducted seasonally meet for an average of six weeks and are preceded by a family-style evening meal. Per the pastor’s request, Aldersgate’s menu is soup, salad, sandwich, and fruit. A nominal charge is received to cover the expenses for food. Volunteer chefs create delicious, nutritious meals and the fellowship is priceless. Testimonies abound about the effectiveness of this piece of the journey. From a pastor’s perspective, it has been invaluable to break bread with my church members on a regular basis. A biblical foundation for this step can be traced to the activities of the early church as *“they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”*¹¹

The trail has been clearly marked so that a path toward the development of fully devoted followers of Christ is laid out. From guest to neighbor, new friend, new believer, or new member, those who have entered the pathway to discipleship are being ushered along by the wind of the Spirit and the work of the church engaged in mission. Rounding the bend are two final pieces in establishing a missional church. They are intensive discipleship training and hands-on missions.

Returning to the mission statement of the UMC, the local church is to be about the business of making disciples. However, in this context, the challenge goes deeper. Our goal is to make disciples who make disciples. We call this step *Disciple Makers*. The design is to meet in groups of two to four and study systematically the basics of the faith and the practice of spiritual disciplines. A variety of

¹⁰ Ephesians 4:12 NRSV.

¹¹ Acts 2:42 NRSV.

curricula is available, but I recommend *Basic Christianity*¹² by John Stott and *Celebration of Discipline*¹³ by Richard Foster. The intent is to solidify both the teaching of God's Word and the practice of a life of faith, a very Wesleyan practical spirituality. At this stage of growth, the disciple is to be equipped to become responsible for evangelizing a seeker and shepherding the new believer in their faith's journey, thus, disciples who make disciples. A regular weekly commitment is strongly advised. It is in the consistency of living life together and maintaining a constant level of accountability that fruitfulness is enhanced. The process is tailored to the individuals, their schedules, and settings. These meetings can take place in homes, restaurants, offices, coffee shops, on the lake, or taking a hike. What is important is diligently working through the material and spending time together. "It takes disciples to make disciples, and Jesus had spent three years teaching his disciples what it meant to be one. It involved practical and down-to-earth lessons on life, attitudes, behavior, trust, forgiveness, love, generosity, obedience to Jesus, and countercultural actions toward others."

¹⁴ An axiom to consider is: this process must move forward, be doable, and be replicable. Like the small group ministry, an underlying premise is to reproduce. After deliberating, prayerful consideration, the pastor may suggest a six to twelve-month process, depending upon the ministry setting. Upon completion, a graduation ceremony is recommended, allowing the church to celebrate their new resident *Disciple Maker*.

The journey is winding back toward the trailhead but there is yet one more piece of the puzzle to connect. At this juncture, the obvious meaning of missions takes full form. Hands-on missions can mean a variety of things and manifest in umpteen ways. For Aldersgate, one of those missional components will be an after-school program called *Spirit Life Academy*. While the idea may be

¹² John Stott. *Basic Christianity*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008).

¹³ Richard J. Foster. *Celebration of Discipline*. (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988).

¹⁴ Christopher J. H. Wright. *The Mission of God's People*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 163.

familiar for some, this unique program will launch in the Fall of 2020 and will be designed to meet tangible needs of the students involved. Because this piece is still under construction, I can only offer some highlights and a few distinctive ways we plan to do missions.

There will be a full slate of activities designed to teach life skills. The program will not be a childcare event. The skills will have practical applications which will make a difference in the students' lives and families. As the student becomes trained and proficient, they will earn points or credits that can be redeemed along the way. They can work for a new pair of shoes, clothes, bicycle, and toys; they can also work to get some basic needs for their home and family. It may be that a new tire for the car, or an oil change, or tune-up would really help out Mom or Dad. They can accumulate and spend their points on many helpful items.

An intentional, distinctly Christian set of life skills will be the cornerstone of the program. Learning to pray, scripture memory, Bible study, and worship will be led by gifted, anointed members of our after-school team. One important training tool will be to have the students take an active role in encouraging family devotionals during mealtimes, or before retiring for the evening, or first thing in the morning. A detailed regimen will be encouraged which will result in significant amassing of points. The regimen will be doable and will speak to the issue of consistency, regularity, and practicality. One of my pastors taught me early on, "*How you are at home is how you are.*"¹⁵ Our goal is to have children and their parents live authentic spiritual lives twenty-four-seven-three-sixty-five. This is a worthy goal for all believers. The program will be scheduled seasonally on a quarter system. It will begin with two students in the third grade, one girl and one boy. Upon completing the first quarter, these two students will have recommended two more for entry into the program for the next quarter. The growth will be exponential. This intentional training will also translate to the weekly gathering as children assume roles of leading in prayer, the reading of scripture, the singing of worship

¹⁵ Ron Dunn. *Sermons on the Home*. (circa 1972).

songs, testifying, greeting, and ushering during the corporate worship service. Transformed lives which transform families and communities for Christ and the glory of God are one of the greatest evidences of a church that is evangelistically missional. The financial underwriting for this piece of the program will be significant but worth the investment. It is built upon a solid foundation of Wesleyan principles for how to use God's monetary blessings for ministry. *"For Wesley, the only legitimate claim to the earth's resources is based not on industry or capital or enterprise or labor, but on the needs of our neighbor. This is the heart of evangelical economics."*¹⁶ We are blessed to be a blessing! The lives of the families impacted by this after-school program will be forever changed for the glory of God.

The discipleship pathway has come full circle. We are at the trailhead again. We have done an exegesis of the community, provided a quality worship experience, established neighborhood small groups, offered restoration resources, scheduled an equipping school of ministry, developed a disciple-making training program, and engaged in tangible, hands-on missions. What do we do now? We embark upon a new adventure of winning the lost and making another disciple and walking the path with him or her. It is truly one of the most exciting ways to live and experience God's purpose for our lives: Love God! Love People! The greatest mission of all!

¹⁶ Theodore W. Jennings, Jr. *Good News to the Poor*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 117.

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