

Mission in a Turbulent Time
Reclaiming Covenant Community, Discipline, and Responsibility

An excerpt from a larger work by The Rev. Canon Peter B. Stube
and
The Rev. Masud Ibn Syedullah

We present this work of pastoral theology in order to invite leaders in the Episcopal Church to re-image what it means to be a missionary church. We believe that how we leaders imagine the process of Salvation determines how we exercise our ministry. From our inception in 1789, we have understood ourselves to be a missionary church. Our founders expressed a missionary call in the name they gave us in 1789, *The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America*. From the beginning, we understood our call to involve the propagation of the Gospel to those places where it had not yet been heard, on this continent and beyond.

We now offer both a way imagining the Church's mission at this time, as well as some strategies as to how the Church may approach and accomplish it.

Of course, in the most basic way, the mission of the Church remains the same as it has been throughout the ages, *to proclaim the Good News of God as it was revealed in Christ Jesus*. However, there has been a tendency to limit the scope of the proclamation of good news and salvation to a personal encounter with Christ. This tendency overlooks what Jesus says of himself and of us in the Luke's writings. Luke 4:18-19 relates the beginning of Jesus public ministry in which he places himself solidarity with the Servant poems of Isaiah and God's concern for the poor, blind, deaf, and captive, thus expanding the scope of the message of salvation. (*"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to bring release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*), Jesus' mission was in continuity with the Prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures, to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. In Acts 1:8, Christ charges us with the continuation of his ministry. Paul also defines the scope of our calling in 2 Corinthians 5:17-20, *"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us."* Therefore, the *Good News of God*, the mission with which we are charged, encompasses not only proclamation and witness, but also our engagement with injustice, racism, sexism, violence, economic irresponsibility, ecological pollution, and hatred. The particular social, political, and economic realities of each era, inform the specific ways the prayerful Church engages that mission and which ministries the Church emphasizes.

As the landscape of society changes (its particular concerns and needs), so does the way the Church communicates and emphasizes its message. What might have been appropriate and helpful to emphasize in one era, may be utterly inappropriate and unhelpful in another. It is quite evident that the landscape of both the society and of the church has changed radically during the last century. No time in history has seen such rapid and substantial change. Every area of life has

been significantly altered by those changes. Communities and institutions of all kinds struggle to know how to proceed in meaningful ways into a future that is so significantly uncharted.

Some Characteristics of the Society's Current Landscape

In order for us to be a missionary church at this time, it is essential that we understand the culture in which we live; its loves, languages, gathering places, arts. Below are some of the characteristics of the culture which must inform a missionary church. Much needs to be said to flesh these matters out, but in order to stir the reader's imagination we list by title the characteristics.

1) The Center of life has shifted from the home to the workplace, school, and to other external activities. Our children are involved in far more activities than we ever dreamed possible consuming most of their waking moments. Families rarely have moments when they all sit together for interrupted time. Workers are employed far from their families of origin.

2) Increased Individualism and Isolation. Gone are porches that we used to sit on and speak to neighbors as they walked by. In their place are entertainment rooms where we sit alone and watch various forms of media.

3) Rapid service and results are expected; waiting for anything is not easily tolerated.

4) Visual information gathering is dominant; listening for information is experienced less. Phyllis Tickle has observed that we as a society turned to media instead of books as the primary source for theology and religion in the early 90's.

5) Fewer centralized places of authority exist; authority is moving increasingly towards smaller groups and the individual.

6) There is an increased plurality of cultures; each commanding recognition and respect.

7) The voices of woman and minorities have a greater chance of being heard.

8) Life expectancy is steadily increasing. There are increasingly more elderly who are healthy.

9) There is less commitment to particular spiritual paths

Some Characteristics of the Church's Current Landscape

1) The Episcopal Churches is Aging

2) Bishops, pastors, and priests are granted less authority than those of a generation ago.

3) There is increased ambiguity about the seat of moral and theological authority in the Episcopal Church.

4) The Episcopal Church, in its attempt to be less hierarchical and more collegial, has forgotten how to speak authoritatively and theologically, and give spiritual direction to the current culture.

5) The voices of women and minorities have a greater hearing than before. A woman now leads our denomination.

6) The Episcopal Church fails to recognize that provocative social issues require careful, respectful conversation, storytelling, and time to come to a gospel response. We fail to understand that this process takes 100's of years.

7) The Episcopal Church is forming covenants with other denominations to advance common worship and ministry.

8) Questions and Opportunities are arising concerning more serious interfaith relationships, particularly with Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists.

9) Contemporary Americans tend to be less committed to a particular tradition or denomination

10) The Episcopal Church is currently faced with addressing cultures whose children are two generations removed from being rooted in the Church.

Our Mission at This Time in History

At this time when the church is increasingly pushed to the margin of society's consciousness, there is a need for the church to recover the missionary nature of our existence and to understand that to be engaged by God carries with it responsibility to God's world for its restoration and reconciliation—not only her people, but also the systems that oppress God's people and created order. The church needs to understand in its heart that it is a missionary society and that its mission is rooted in the Hebrew text of Micah, "He has told you O mortal what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" Until recently it has been relatively easy for the church to be at ease, to be complacent, living with a sense of entitlement, expecting others to come to us. We have not understood that to do justice and love kindness requires that we be intentionally engaged with the world and all its systems. It is time to be more like St. Francis who was present among the people and less like St. Benedict who has shaped our spirituality for centuries.

What might the attributes of clerical leaders be in a Missionary Church?

1. Clergy will be rooted in covenant community with God, other clergy, and with the faith communities they serve. Signs of our rootedness in covenant would include:
 - a. corporate prayer/worship/adoration of the Holy One
 - b. willingness to engage the past and present stories of the people of God including ones own.
 - c. faithfulness to the vows and commitments made in covenant community.
 - d. commitment to community life: sharing joys, hopes, struggles, disappointment, work, recreation time, celebrations, defeats, etc.
 - e. as agents of God we share what we have been given as the Holy Spirit directs us.
2. Clergy will be persons of spiritual discipline.
 - a. persons of personal prayer
 - b. students of Scripture, tutored in the symbols and language of Biblical/Christian tradition.
3. Clergy will be students of the culture we seek to serve, tutored in its symbols, metaphors, current landscapes, arts.
4. Clergy will be students of human nature and the behavioral sciences.
5. Clergy will embrace and seek truth wherever it leads whatever it costs, knowing that all truth is God's truth.
6. Students of ourselves so that we can discern the presuppositions, theologies, brokenness that define us or block our ability to speak in the language our people can hear. To do this we will be under spiritual direction and in therapy.
7. Clergy will be willing to embrace idioms, music, and the soul of the people we serve, living as they do: being a friend in order to bring a friend to God. Like John and Charles Wesley and Martin Luther we will use the music of our people to impart theology and the faith of others who have found God in times of chaos and brokenness.
8. Clergy will be non-judgmental, confident that if we bring folks to Christ, he will do the work of transformation. The Holy Spirit will convict of sin and call God's children (including us) to repentance from those places where we are complicit with evil.
9. Clergy will be willing to embrace *Mystery*- to trust the faithfulness of the Holy Spirit and not to demand knowing ahead of time all of the details. "We walk by faith, not by sight." "The

wind blows where it chooses.” On the journey of faith we are granted the next step or two. This makes our life of prayer, both individual and corporate, all the more essential.

10. Clergy are willing to examine our vocations, skills, use of resources, gifts, to determine how they can be utilized to further the mission/purpose of God. Ten percent of our resources is not enough in a missionary church.

We invite the church therefore to reclaim a missionary vision in which we re-imagine the meaning of mission in all of the scope intended by God. We invite the leaders of the church to reclaim covenant community, discipline and responsibility. If we capture the richer vision, we will understand that mission of God is too big for any one of us to accomplish. If we are to be about the redemption of the world and all her systems we need to empower a laity gifted in law and politics, economics and ecology, international relations, medicine and every other discipline; empowering them by inviting them to the same spiritual disciplines we ourselves embrace.

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