

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# THE SECRETS OF BEING A MISSIONAL CONGREGATION

1 Peter 3:21-22

Five years have rolled on since we were introduced to First Church. Much has happened in that time:

- Prayer has continued to be a consistent practice of the church. There are regular prayer meetings, members of the church are instructed on ways to pray and encouraged to pray individually, and each committee meeting involves prayer and praise throughout the agenda.
- Small groups have formed to encourage personal accountability in the congregation. These groups create spaces for members of the church to explain how they are seeking to live their Christian faith in daily life.
- Other groups have formed in the church to address specific issues in the town. These groups continue to work with the racism task force as well as with education, nutrition, and other issues. These groups also have proven to be helpful places for new people coming to the church to get involved and to build relationships with church members.
- The Hispanic female pastor is now well established and known in the town.

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- First Pub Church is thriving. Many other congregations in the town have become interested in setting up similar sorts of gatherings. Rather than seeing this as competition, the members of FPC have worked with these other congregations. FPC emphasizes the importance of talking about the Christian faith and practicing their faith through service toward others.
- The town's racism task force has tackled several major historical injustices among the various neighborhoods in the town. While change is slow, the tenor of the conversation within the town has begun to shift. Notions of privilege and of systemic failures toward the Hispanic neighborhood have begun to be accepted concepts in town discussions. Some efforts are being made to generate private investment in the Hispanic neighborhood and to create more ways to connect that neighborhood physically with the rest of the town.
- The relationship between First Church and the Hispanic church has flourished. The members of both churches have begun to look forward to seeing each other at congregational events as well as informally. Some of the children are even requesting playdates and using both English and Spanish with each other, helping draw the adults closer to one another.
- The recovery ministries have grown substantially, and they have become an engine for growth in both congregations. The depth of substance abuse in the town had not been recognized before this; but with the hospitality the congregations have offered through these groups, many people are stepping forward and receiving the help they need.
- While the size of the town precludes a massive increase at First Church, the church still has attracted new people, invited them into the Christian faith, and begun the process of equipping them to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

- The existing members of First Church have become much more generous in their giving.
- A sense of joy and hope pervades the congregation. They realize that they have no guarantee of all going well in the coming years or even months. However, they trust that God will continue to supply all they need if they stay faithful in missional work.

In looking back over these changes, the members of First Church often chuckle to think that it all started in a moment of desperation. They needed to pay the bills and didn't have enough money. With nothing left to do, they had turned to God in prayer. That changed everything.

The pastor who had been at First Church at the beginning of this missional transformation picked up this theme in his remarks when he was invited back for the congregation's homecoming. He explained that never in their wildest dreams did he or the rest of the congregation think that they would find the power, wisdom, and faith to move into mission from what had been the lowest point in the congregation's history. At the time, they just wanted to survive. However, by channeling their uncertainty and fear into reliance on God rather than looking for a magic bullet that would fix them, they took the necessary steps to become missional. They found that being missional was less a matter of having the right answers and techniques than it was being prepared to follow God wherever God led. God was already in the world doing mission. The church just needed to serve alongside God, participating in the redemption of the world through the gifts God gave the church.

## **"Secrets" of Effective Mission**

### ***Disciples Make Disciples***

First Church had learned in those early days, as well as in the days after the new pastor had come, that participation with God meant a change of heart. As the pastor put it, before Jesus commissioned his earliest followers to make disciples, he had spent years developing those followers as disciples. This was the great secret: *disciples make disciples*, and neither First Church nor any other congregation

could be effective in mission unless the people in that congregation began by submitting to become disciples of Jesus Christ.

***Both Individuals and Congregations Make Disciples***

God had used the desperation of First Church to bring the people to the point where they were willing to do this. Before then, the congregation was just comfortable enough, even in its steady decline, to avoid turning seriously to God. However, as exile from the building or even from existence as a congregation came close, the congregation relented and repented. The real danger because of the music director deepened this reliance on God, not allowing the congregation to go “back to normal” once the immediate financial pressures were alleviated. And after seeing the faithful love and power of God sustain them in their need, the leaders of First Church decided they didn’t want to go “back to normal.” They wanted to continue their new reliance on God both personally and corporately. This led them to another secret: *both individuals and congregations are needed to make disciples.*

The members of First Church had always thought of themselves as individual believers who gathered together because of common beliefs. The role of the congregation was to support them in these personal beliefs with instruction, inspiration, and some opportunities to practice their faith. In terms of mission, this meant that the congregation was supposed to equip the individual members to evangelize their neighbors. And, frankly, the congregation had not done such a great job of that.

However, as the congregation made its turn into being missional, and as the congregation members began to share their faith more, they found that one-on-one evangelism was not enough. The town needed a bigger public witness than what the individuals could present on their own. It needed the witness of a corporate body to address the corporate struggles of the town.

They first realized this when First Church got involved with the vacation Bible school in the Hispanic neighborhood. Addressing the issues of racism and injustice with individuals was important, but to make a dent in the economic and political inequality faced by

the people in the Hispanic neighborhood required an entire congregation to stand in public witness for love of neighbor. As a congregation they could connect with other organizations and create a collective impact that was felt across the town in ways that individual volunteers could not. In addition, as a congregation they could give birth to new congregations. First Church had done this by first attracting the people in the pub with its public witness and then launching them as First Pub Church. This launch led to more launches, both in the formation of First Cantina Church and of other congregations the leaders of FPC helped.

### ***Growing Mission = Growing Faith***

As First Church had sought to be faithful with these opportunities, the pastor believed it had uncovered one other secret: *growing in mission goes hand-in-hand with growing in faith*. As the missional activities continued, the people in First Church began to feel God's Spirit calling them to reflect the character of God more fully. They wanted to experience God's joy, hope, and healing within their congregation and to share these virtues with others. This, the pastor concluded, was a never-ending process. Just as we can never exhaust knowing the eternal God, so we can never exhaust growing into God's likeness or participating in God's mission. Even with all it had done, First Church might have difficult days ahead of it. Being in mission did not mean God barred that from happening. It just meant that the congregation would deal with whatever came as those who were committed to being more faithful as disciples and to inviting others to become disciples.

### **More "Secrets" to Becoming Missional**

In reflecting on First Church's experiences, the pastor uncovered the above three core secrets about becoming a missional congregation. We can add a few more.

#### ***Creativity***

The activities First Church found itself using to be missional are not the ones that we usually think of when dealing with evangelism or mission. Yet, as we've seen, God sent the people of God on mission

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in different ways throughout the Bible. When Jesus pronounced the Great Commission, he did not wipe away those other ways of being in mission. He just made it clear that the primary work of the church is to make disciples, which includes baptizing and teaching. He never specified or limited how we should do those things.

Even the corporate activities of witnessing against racism and of being open to talking about physical pleasures are part of making disciples. While these activities do not directly invite people outside the church into discipleship, they

- provide a public witness people outside the church can observe;
- form the people in the church as disciples; and
- provide a means for redeeming the culture.

Each of these is necessary for making disciples.

Providing a public witness is essential if we want people to hear our message. Even if we are not directly inviting people to become disciples of Jesus Christ, we can present ourselves to those outside the church in a way that awakens them to the redemptive work of God. When they see us caring for those in need and creating a community in which all people are valued, they see us living the same way that Jesus did. This witness is the first step to building credibility with them. In time, that credibility will allow us to share the gospel with them and invite them to become disciples. This is living into the command Jesus gave in Acts 1:8, “You will be my witnesses.”

The second point about deepening the discipleship of those already in the church is not as obvious but is no less important. Remember, the Great Commission tells us that we are to make disciples “as we are going.” As we go through life, we encounter people who are Christians as well as those who are not. While Christians may already be disciples, we can still encourage them to grow in their discipleship. This is no less a way of fulfilling the Great Commission.

Some of the greatest evangelists in history focused on guiding Christians to grow as disciples. John Wesley, for example, preached to those who were already baptized members of the Church of England but who needed to become more intentional in seeking after

scriptural holiness. Jonathan Edwards preached to those who were already Puritans but desired them to grow more deeply in their love of Jesus Christ. Even though their work was making disciples of those who were already in the church, these two preachers were clearly obedient to the Great Commission.

The last point about redeeming culture may seem strange. The Great Commission makes it sound as if our primary work is to make individuals into disciples of Jesus Christ. Yes, but making disciples is not God's final purpose. Ultimately, God seeks to redeem all creation by establishing the kingdom of God. The church is commissioned to make disciples so people can anticipate the day when God brings the kingdom in its fullness. Jesus himself made this point when he preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt 4:17). He called us to make disciples so that those disciples could live in his coming kingdom.

Jesus not only commissions us to make disciples so we can participate in a future kingdom but to be disciples participating in that kingdom now. The way his earliest disciples organized themselves as a church after Pentecost demonstrates this. They built new kinds of communities that allowed for dignity to be given to men and women, such as the church in Antioch. These new communities began to redeem the culture and social structures by how they lived.

It is impossible for a congregation of disciples to avoid redeeming the larger culture and social structures if those disciples are obeying the Great Commission. Author Andy Crouch suggests that part of the mission we are called to is "culture making."<sup>1</sup> Theologian James Cone likewise argues that evangelism irreducibly requires engagement in politics.<sup>2</sup>

The early church demonstrated what this engagement looked like. As it made disciples, it formed a community that defined itself by love of God and love of neighbor. Over the centuries, the church

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1 Andy Crouch. *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008).

2 James H. Cone, "Evangelization and Politics: A Black Perspective," *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, vol. 2, 1980–1992, eds. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 531–42.

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expanded its witness, prompting entire cultures and societies to examine how people are treated. One of the greatest global contributions of the church in doing this has been the establishment of human rights as we know them today.<sup>3</sup>

When looking at what creative ways of being in mission allow a congregation to do (provide a public witness people outside the church can observe, form the people in the church as disciples, and provide means for redeeming the culture), it becomes clear that obedience to the Great Commission can and should reach beyond the stereotypical ideas we often associate with missions. This does not dilute or minimize Christ's commission for the church to make disciples but expands how that commission ripples out to encompass a wide array of activities.

### **Sacrifice**

Throughout its journey to being missional, First Church needed to make some difficult decisions, such as joining the joint vacation Bible school in the park or letting go of the members who could not follow the congregation in mission. This reminds us that, while God does amazing things through those who commit themselves to making disciples, being faithful to that mission often entails sacrifice.

Sacrifice is interwoven with mission. Even Jesus had to sacrifice to complete the work God sent him to do. Paul reminds us, in Philippians 2:6-8, Jesus, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” Only after this sacrifice “God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name” (v. 9).

If Jesus had to sacrifice to participate in the mission of God, how much more shall we!

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3 Mike Aquilina and James L. Papandrea, *Seven Revolutions: How Christianity Changed the World and Can Change It Again* (New York: Image, 2015), 6.

But what sort of sacrifice does God ask our congregations to make to be missional? While the Scripture is clear that the mission of God can demand that we sacrifice our wealth, our freedom, or even our lives, what we most often sacrifice is our comfort. Many of our congregations have become comfortable being ineffective at making disciples. Even with all the tactics available to be missional, we settle into a pattern that serves our interests rather than Christ's commission.

If we are serious about being missional congregations, we sacrifice that comfort. This can be disorienting. It might feel as if we are moving from our native culture to a foreign culture, having to learn new traditions that are strange and unusual to us. We might need to become accustomed to new forms of music, new kinds of food, new timetables, new ways of organizing, new venues for engaging in ministry, new people we have not had in our congregations before, and a new sense of what responsibilities we have as Christians.

For some of our congregations, the buildings themselves are hindrances to mission. We spend nearly everything to keep the facilities from crashing down on us, and we know they are not attractive for new people to enter. It may be that we are called to sacrifice our buildings so we can free the finances and energy we are putting into maintaining them to focus on making disciples. How many city hall meetings could we attend if we had fewer trustee meetings dealing with deferred maintenance? How many more houses for the homeless could we construct if we spent fewer hours patching the old HVAC system? How much money could go to evangelism if we didn't have to keep the extra amount on hand because the roof might spring another leak?

Many congregations resist these sacrifices, thinking they will lose what it means to be a church by losing those comfortable ways of operating. In fact, our sacrifices help us focus on what is most valuable to a congregation: relationships and faith. Making disciples calls us deeper into each of these. It brings us closer to God as we rely more heavily on God to transform ourselves and others, and it draws us deeper into relationships with God and with those inside and outside of the church. We encourage one another in our faith inside the church and share the good news of Jesus with those outside the church.

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Even though we are reclaiming what is most important to us as a congregation when we become more missional, letting go of buildings, traditions, and rituals can hurt. It is a sacrifice, but one that is worth it. As Jesus said, “When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (John 16:21-22).

The things we hold on to in our congregations often do not bring us joy. Going through the pain of letting go of whatever stands in the way of mission will free us to be filled with joy. We will not be weighed down by the cares of the past and present, but will be hopeful for what God can do with us in the future as we draw closer to each other and to God.

### ***Leadership and Gifts***

Leaders were essential characters throughout the story of First Church. This included the pastors but also the various lay leaders who came alongside the two pastors. They took the initial steps to be formed as disciples through spiritual disciplines and from that saw the opportunities for the congregation to increase its public witness. They also made the hard decisions and accepted the risk their decisions entailed.

The most important quality for leaders in a missional congregation, both lay and clergy, is faithfulness. How the leaders practice their faith in their daily lives and how they conduct the activities of the church will set a pattern for the congregation.<sup>4</sup> Leaders should be selected first on whether they will be exemplars for what the congregation wants to become.

This is not to suggest that congregations should be led in a top-down

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4 Rick Richardson, who teaches evangelism at Wheaton College, has found that congregations cannot become missionally vibrant unless their leaders experience accountability, inspiration, and instruction in personal witness every thirty days. He recommends that church leaders, especially senior pastors, join a cohort of other leaders who will provide this. This will set the example for how the rest of the congregation practices their faith. Rick Richardson, “Local Church Culture & Evangelistic Witness, Engaging Senior Leaders (part 2 of 4),” *Re-Kindle: Engaging in Gospel Conversations*, November 18, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HDCxzxRneqs>.

model. Different missional congregations should choose governing structures that fit best with how they operate. Whatever structure is chosen, though, missional congregations should always be diligent to discern those who have leadership gifts in their midst and to give them opportunities to grow in those gifts. This becomes the basis for multiplying congregations, as each congregation recognizes new leaders and nurtures them so they can be sent out and establish new congregations.

Alan Hirsch suggests in his book *The Permanent Revolution* that the primary gifts God has given Christians for the mission of the church are laid out in Ephesians 4:11-13: “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”<sup>5</sup> According to Hirsch, apostles see visions of where God wants the gospel to go and proclaim the gospel in those places. Prophets recognize the differences between the truth of God and cultural values, providing a corrective voice for how God would have people live. Evangelists welcome people into the Christian faith. Pastors, or what Hirsch refers to as “shepherds,” nurture people in the faith. Teachers understand and explain the faith to those who are already within the church.<sup>6</sup>

Hirsch argues that all these gifts are necessary for a congregation to be missional. While the governing leaders do not need to have any one of these gifts, each person in a congregation should know what his or her gifts are, so he or she can step forward and provide leadership in missional activities when necessary.

Hirsch believes all these gifts build on one another to sustain the missional work of the church. Without apostles leading the charge to share the gospel in new places, congregations cannot be established. Without prophets clarifying God’s truth in relation to the culture, congregations can lose their faithfulness to the gospel,

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5 Alan Hirsch and Tim Catchim, *The Permanent Revolution: Apostolic Imagination and Practice for the 21st Century Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 7–8.

6 *Ibid.*, 9.

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and evangelists will not have a worthwhile community to invite people to join. Without evangelists, no one becomes a Christian or joins a congregation, so there is no need to nurture or teach. Without shepherding, people do not feel loved and do not stay for the teaching. Without teaching, no one who stays in the church matures in faith.<sup>7</sup>

According to Hirsch, mainline denominational congregations have de-emphasized the gifts of apostles, prophets, and evangelists.<sup>8</sup> Historically, they valued all five gifts, but over time the emphasis on being a comfortable institutional structure drove out or silenced the people with the first three. Without the apostolic gift of moving beyond the walls of the church with the gospel, the prophetic voice to differentiate between God's will and cultural values, and the evangelistic gift of inviting people to become followers of Jesus Christ, these congregations became nothing but groups of people who love and teach one another. That may sound nice, but it is not missional.<sup>9</sup> It is akin to the fictional story at the beginning of the book in which Jesus never delivered the Great Commission.

Compounding the problem, the shepherding and teaching roles tend to be reserved for those with specific expertise. This means that most people in the church are treated as no more than consumers of pastoral care and pastoral teaching. The result is to kill any missional capacity that a congregation might have. To be a missional congregation requires everyone to get involved in making disciples. There is no room for people to be consumers only, except for those who are so new to the Christian faith that they need to learn the basic contours of their commitment to Jesus Christ. Even that teaching, though, should be imbued with the call for these new Christians to get active in God's mission.

The only reason that the mainline denominations have survived so long without the outward-looking gifts is that they grew

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7 Ibid., 115.

8 Ibid., 17–20.

9 Alan Hirsch, "The Overlooked Leadership Roles," *Leadership Journal* Spring 2008, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2008/spring/7.32.html?start=1>.

large and wealthy thanks to the earlier missional movements that birthed them. They also fed off a supportive culture. However, now that the culture has changed, those of us who pastor existing main-line congregations are reaping the result of being focused on inward activities: trying to keep the institution going while fighting back the nagging fear we will one day disappear from lack of new people joining us. And the denominations will disappear without new congregations being planted in new locations to replace the ones that are closing.

Leadership drawing from all five gifts is essential to bring us back from this dangerous edge. We need it to lead our congregations into mission as well as to lead our denominations back to health as participants in the Great Commission.

### **Brings Us Back to the Great Commission**

In pronouncing the Great Commission, Jesus launched the church to participate in God's work of redeeming creation by making disciples. The church was to invite these new disciples into a community of Christians through baptism and teach them what Jesus had taught, demonstrating to the world what the kingdom of God looks like. Jesus left the door wide open for how the church could carry out this work.

Being missional does not start with techniques for persuading people to become Christians or impressing people with great programs or even with planting new churches, but with God's power transforming our character. As we have seen in tracking the experiences of First Church, every move toward tactics requires a deeper dive into our own discipleship. A hypocrite or lukewarm Christian might be able to work for justice or preach a good sermon, but demonstrating a consistent public witness that will attract people to become disciples of Jesus Christ requires one to have a committed faith.

Congregations are an indispensable unit of witness God uses to form disciples. They are the local community of faith that provides a witness to God's goodness by how it engages the culture and social structures around it, welcomes individuals to become disciples, demonstrates how people can pattern their lives by

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loving God and loving neighbor, and launches those new disciples into the world as agents of reconciliation. By living this way, congregations become the sign of God's kingdom for those outside the church to see, a foretaste of what the kingdom is like for those who join it, and an instrument God uses to advance that kingdom in the world.

Becoming a Great Commission congregation begins when we yield everything about our congregation to the Holy Spirit. Only then do we determine what missional tactics best suit our congregation's gifts and context. This may require rethinking the kinds of activities our congregations get involved in, redefining how we carry out the ministries we already do, or sacrificing things that have made our congregations comfortable for a long time. Practically speaking, it may also require looking to our denominational leaders for help or helping those leaders understand the new vision that our congregation has for becoming missional if they are uncomfortable with the changes we want to make.

All of this is an admittedly difficult move for existing congregations. In some cases, it is like recasting ourselves as a new church start, integrating the Great Commission into everything we do. That is the only way to do it, however. Much as we would like to, we cannot cram missional activities into what we are already doing or assign those activities to a committee while the rest of the congregation's life continues unaffected. As Jesus explained, we need new wineskins for new wine. For many of us, understanding the Great Commission this way is new wine compared to the comfortable decline we have experienced. Our congregational structures, policies, and procedures need to change if we are to live into it—and so do our denominations, creating the space for these kinds of congregational realignments with the Great Commission.

The missional tactics in this book, then, are not a list of best practices meant to generate church growth. Rather, they are meant to provide practical steps for congregations that have already decided to commit to discipleship internally so they can be more effective at making disciples of Jesus Christ in the world. And they are a call to that commitment for those congregations that have not yet made it.

### **The Secrets of Being a Missional Congregation**

As uncomfortable as taking the step to become Great Commission congregations may be, we do not engage in God's mission alone. We follow a path that Jesus walked first as the sent God. This is a path with a sure outcome if we remain faithful to God's purposes. First Peter 3:21-22 assures us of the final success Jesus enjoyed, describing him as "Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him." For all the pain, sacrifice, and difficulty we may have to face, we are promised that the path of mission is a path that leads to glory. And, if we do it right, we will know great hope and joy along the way.