

DEVELOPING A MISSION HEART IN OUR CURRICULUM PRAXIS

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At Neil Anderson's invitation I'd like to reflect for a short while on the role of mission and mission studies in the whole theological curriculum. I'll do this in the form of several affirmations and a question, with the aim of generating discussion amongst us.

1. God Is Outgoing Love, Expressed in Creation, Jesus Christ and the Life of The Spirit

Because I teach mission all the time, I'm sometimes not sure whether this is so basic as to not need stating among theologians, or whether in some theological circles it's neglected or even disputed.

Theology is talk about God. And God, in the Christian tradition, is revealed through the scriptures and pre-eminently through Jesus Christ. The essence of Christian belief is that God is love, that God loves the world, that God seeks relationship, that God offers a bridge into relationship through the Good News of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. As Daniel Migliore puts it, "God is sovereign, costly love that liberates and renews life."¹

We find ourselves in the middle of a cosmic story. Creation groans and strains towards a fulfilment which we find hard to even imagine, but in which God's presence and God's ways are full and complete. It is not only the church which lives between the "already" and the "not yet", as we often put it, but also God, at least insofar as God is engaged in this time-space continuum.

So God has a mission, the *missio Dei*. Because God is non-coercive, welcoming love, God does not zap the universe and make it submit. There is a cosmic lure which is vulnerable love.

These basic understandings of God lead us to talk of a God whose very nature is missionary. It was Karl Barth who was the first to say this clearly in 1932: Mission is not primarily a human activity engaged in by the church but primarily the activity of God who sends Godself in the mission of the Son and the Spirit.²

2. The Church is Missionary by Nature

As is clear throughout the New Testament, to be a follower of Jesus is to be sent as he was sent. Jesus is quoted in Jn 17:18 as saying, "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."

¹ Daniel L Migliore, *Faith seeking understanding: An introduction to Christian theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 72.

² Norman Thomas, in the introduction to extracts from the 1952 Willingen Conference of the International Missionary Conference, in Norman E Thomas, ed. *Classic texts in mission and world Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 104.

The church is therefore missionary by its very nature just as God is missionary by very nature.³ We understand ourselves essentially as called “to share and live out the gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth and the end of time”.⁴

In many circles these days the word “missionary” has been reduced to mean a person who goes overseas and pursues mission full-time. So another word, which actually means exactly the same as “missionary”—“missional”— is coming into favour. Whichever word we use, the church is essentially missional, that is, constituted by its call to live into and proclaim the kingdom of God, which is “the sphere of life where God’s Spirit is in control, where justice, peace and joy are experienced completely and permanently (Rom 14:17)”.⁵

If the church ceases to be missionary it ceases to be the church. “Our life in this world is life in mission”.⁶

3. So Theology is Inherently Missiological

If God is missionary and the church is missionary, then theology is inherently missiological.

As is often said, Paul was an outstanding missionary theologian. His was a missionary theology through and through. He didn’t reflect on God and then try to apply it. His whole theology was one of reflecting on the call to a universal mission, particularly to the Gentiles. “His theology of mission is practically synonymous with the totality of [his] awesome reflections on Christian life.”⁷

I’m glad to say that this understanding of theology as reflecting on the God who is on mission for the church which is on mission is fairly widespread among evangelical theological colleges. The very meaning of “evangelical”, Good News, suggests that we are more likely to see theology in its missional perspective. I think it’s fair to say that evangelical colleges have succumbed less often than some others to the temptation to live out of a Christendom framework, where maintenance of the church as a major institution in society becomes a central task.⁸ And along with most parts of the global church, Evangelicalism has benefited greatly from the broader understanding of mission that has swept through theology in the last fifty years or so.

³ Stephen B Bevens and Roger P Schroeder, *Constants in context: A theology of mission for today* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 10.

⁴ J Andrew Kirk, *What is mission? Theological explorations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999), 30.

⁵ Kirk, *What is mission? Theological explorations*, 29.

⁶ Emilio Castro, ‘Liberation, development and evangelism: Must we choose?’, *Occasional Bulletin for Missionary Research* 2.3 (July 1978), 87.

⁷ David J Bosch, *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 124.

⁸ James A Scherer, ‘Missiology as a discipline and what it includes’, in *New directions in mission and evangelization 2: Theological foundations*, eds. James A Scherer and Stephen B Bevens (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 182.

It is now possible to find in many seminaries a unified sense that we educate in order to equip leaders to engage in mission, within and beyond the church, for the sake of the kingly reign of God.

It's broader than previously understood because mission today is widely regarded as encompassing the whole of God's purposes in the world. It is a holistic concept that includes, proclamation, discipling, incarnational witness, the pursuit of peace and justice, seeking a renewed relationship with creation, being salt in society or light on the hill, living as a welcoming Christian community, and so on. It is in this broad sense that theological education in so many places is more and more missiological at its heart.

I'll give you a couple of illustrations of how it plays itself out at Whitley College. and I'll be interested in your experience here at Vose.

It starts with a recognition by all Faculty that we share this vision. It's quite explicit at Whitley. Our tagline is "Equipping leaders for a different world".

Mark Brett sees the Hebrew Bible as a living set of documents from which we can learn a great deal about what it means to live in covenant and aspiring to be a blessing to the nations, as Genesis 12:3 puts it. He connects issues such as the Hebrew view of the land with contemporary indigenous views and with ecology. He teaches a unit called *War and Peace in the Hebrew Bible*, where our mission as peacemakers is explored. He teaches a unit on *Salvation in the Hebrew Bible*, which is on the theology of mission.

Keith Dyer is a returned missionary who teaches New Testament with the aim of fostering discipleship and mission. He teaches a unit on *Mission in the New Testament*. His units on the Gospels follow the tradition of Athol Gill, one of his predecessors, who prodded the church provocatively on the radical demands of following Jesus in discipleship as mission, a vision in the tradition of the Anabaptists. Thorwald Lorenzen is currently teaching a unit on *Resurrection, Justice and Discipleship*, which links systematic theological concerns to do with the resurrection with the call to discipleship, particularly as expressed in living into God's justice and peace.

Marita Munro teaches church history largely through the lens of its growth, theological formulations and world mission. As we missiologists love to say about the early church, its theology grew out of a need to define itself that arose because it lived the gospel so successfully that it grew rapidly. In this sense, historian Martin Kähler was right when said that "mission is the mother of theology".⁹

Frank Rees, Whitley's Principal, also has a missiological theology. He teaches a unit, for example, on *Jesus and his Mission*. Also in the systematic theology offerings are units on public theology, Bonhoeffer, ecology and economics and justice. Sean Winter, a British Baptist scholar who has just started as professor of New Testament at the United Faculty of Theology, recently said in a sermon at Whitley, "There are only two questions worth asking in theology: "Who is God?" and "So what?". I like the provocative simplicity of these questions. Units on economics, on ecology and on public theology

⁹ Martin Kähler, *Schriften zur Christologie und Mission* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1971 [1908]), 190, translated and cited by Bosch, *Transforming mission*, 16

are just illustrations that the “So what?” question is alive and kicking in theological education.

Simon Holt teaches spirituality and pastoral care, but he published a book last year entitled *God next door: Spirituality and mission in the neighbourhood*.¹⁰ He continually promotes an spirituality of everyday life that connects with others. It’s a gentle mission that permeates all of life.

Our supervised field education has been broadened, from catering to ordination students to catering for all students. We have a new unit, put together by Roslyn Wright, our Director of Field Education, called *Reflection for Mission*. We’re just beginning a push to have all students, whether for ordination or not, to do at least one unit which contains an internship, reflective action or supervised ministry or mission.

4. Theology is Inherently Interdisciplinary

Going through the missiological interests of my colleagues tends to emphasise the disciplinary nature of theological study. It’s true that in the Melbourne College of Divinity there are four fields and we have to live with specialisation. But we don’t like it. We’re introducing more and more interdisciplinary units to make the point that thinking about God is a unitary activity. In whichever discipline, it is still faith seeking understanding.

We also deliberately subvert the MCD’s four fields by cross-registering units. So you can study school chaplaincy for mission or pastoral care credit. You can study interfaith dialogue for mission, pastoral care or education credit, and so on.

5. Missiology Has a Place, but Doesn’t Own the Study of Mission

So where does a missiologist fit in? I’m aware that there is a real debate about whether having a missiologist tends to make others leave it to him or her. The same is said of having a mission committee in a local church—do the others then see mission as merely one department instead of suffusing the life of the church?

I’m satisfied that missiology deserves a special place in the curriculum. It explicitly explores mission activity, with a clear focus on the church as it engages the world. It draws synoptically on all the other disciplines, using biblical studies, history, theology, pastoral care, education, worship and bringing them together as any project in practical theology does. There is a sense in which I prefer students to study mission units after they’ve done the others, but so often students arrive breathlessly wanting to study mission, so we can’t control that easily.

In many places, missiology focuses specifically on missionary activity as traditionally viewed—things such as cross-cultural mission, evangelism and Bible translation. When missiology gained its colours in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, and when it established itself in North America in the 1970s, missiology largely wanted to

¹⁰ Simon Carey Holt, *God next door: Spirituality and mission in the neighbourhood* (Brunswick East, Vic.: Acorn Press, 2007).

help train overseas missionaries.¹¹ But these days, and certainly at a place like Whitley, mission is seen as the total impulse and the whole range of activities that arise from our call to co-operate with God's mission.

Another reason for studying missiology separately as well as within other disciplines is that missiology draws on a wide range of social sciences to assist the church in its mission task: anthropology, cross-cultural studies, communication theory, linguistics, sociology, politics, economics, psychology and so on.

So at Whitley I and my adjunct teacher colleagues teach a wide range of specifically missiological units. For example we offer an introduction to mission, and units on evangelism, aid and development, global mission, church planting, reconciliation, ecological mission, the multicultural church, anthropology, leadership, educational chaplaincy, interfaith dialogue and understanding Islam.

6. How Can We Develop Our Mission Heart in a Curriculum?

I wonder how we can develop a sense of mission as an integral part of theological education? At Whitley we're in the middle of a review process where we're asking how our theological education can best serve students and the churches as they engage in the world.

We're certain that it will involve a greater sense of praxis for students. We're encouraging all students to do studies which involve reflective action, whether an internship, a project, supervised ministry, a short-term mission trip or Clinical Pastoral Education.

We're introducing case studies at all levels so that our theological discussion is grounded in a specific life situation. Last week, in my class on the multicultural church, I used a case study at the beginning of class about an intercultural conflict. It was just great how often we referred back to that specific situation as we explored challenging concepts such as high and low context communication, high and low power distance cultures, and guilt and shame cultures.

But it's an ongoing journey. I'd be interested to know how it is here at Vose, and what you've learnt along the way, and what ideas you have for the future in bringing a mission heart to the centre of the curriculum.

Ross Langmead, 27-8-09

¹¹ Scherer, 'Missiology as a discipline and what it includes', 174.