

*Missio Dei in Vicinia*

The Mission of God in the Neighborhood:

An Ecclesiology for the Local Parish

by

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What is the church? What is God’s purpose in the church? What is the church called to be and do in the world? There are any number of ways into the conversation about the nature and purpose of the church, and this discussion has continued throughout the church’s history from New Testament times, through moments of reformation and contextual challenge, to the present time of grappling anew with the mission of the church.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the nature and purpose of the church, ecclesiology also accounts for such other aspects of church life as leadership and ordination, the sacraments, worship, mission, and is closely related with understandings of the nature of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit, and questions of sanctification, election, salvation and discipleship. In fact, ecclesiology can never really be separated from other branches of theology as a topic in isolation, but as Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen—who has written an *Introduction to Ecclesiology*—observes, ecclesiology becomes “a kind of *summa* of any given theological tradition.”<sup>2</sup>

When we think of the local church, however, we readily recognize that there are particularities that arise in various local contexts. For example, while, until fairly recently, Anglicans universally accepted *The Book of Common Prayer* as the standard for worship, there was always room within the rubrics for “local custom” to be observed.

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<sup>1</sup> “Missio Dei in Vicinia” may not be the best Latin translation of “The Mission of God in the Neighborhood”, but I did want to convey the link with the important concept of *missio Dei*.

<sup>2</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical & Global Perspectives*, Kindle ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), loc. 149.

Within the Anglican tradition, as in many traditions, there has long been room for accommodations that respond to the local context.

In this paper I wish to explore the formal and informal ecclesiologies of a particular local parish, the Church of St. John the Evangelist, in Hamilton, Ontario. I pretend no objective distance in this exploration and write in the first person since I am none other than the “rector” of the parish. I recognize that I occupy a particular place in and view of the ecclesiology of the parish.

After detailing as best as I can the actual formal and informal ecclesiology of the parish, I will seek to outline what this seems to say about our general theology and local contextual theology as it supports our working ecclesiology.

Finally, I hope to propose a general framework for a missional ecclesiology that relates to the tradition of the parish and adequately accounts for the local context in which the parish is situated. I will conclude by suggesting a program for sharing this vision.

### **The Church of St. John the Evangelist, Hamilton**

The Church of St. John the Evangelist, Hamilton (SJE) is an Anglican parish in the Diocese of Niagara. As this parish seeks its way forward within its present context, it has inherited both formal and informal ecclesiologies that must be accounted for.

#### Formal Ecclesiology

##### **Anglican Tradition**

Anglican polity sees the basic unit of the church as the bishop and his or her diocese. Historically, parishes were convenient geographical structures for the

administration of the church, where the bishop might delegate some of his pastoral responsibilities to local clergy and permit the establishment of a church (building). The local geographic area and community was formed into a parish and the resident clergy charged with the cure of souls.

The Thirty Nine Articles hold to the classic reformed view of the church, as “the visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men (sic), in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.”<sup>3</sup>

At the conclusion of the celebration of the Eucharist Anglicans have expressed their thanksgiving to God (and identity as the church) in the prayer that says in part, “we are living members of his mystical body, which is the blessed company of all faithful people; and are also heirs through hope of thy everlasting kingdom.”<sup>4</sup> The principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi*, so fundamental to Anglicanism, means that our theology is very much worked out and articulated most clearly in our liturgical texts. We are not a confessional church.

In practical terms, however, the historic legacy has resulted in a church where bishops and their clergy—those preach and administer the sacraments—together especially with their buildings in which these activities occurred, were what was thought of as “the church.” In short, Anglicans have often thought of the church in terms of clergy

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<sup>3</sup> The General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church; Together with the Psalter as Is Appointed to Be Said or Sung in Churches and the Form and Manner of Ordaining and Consecrating of Bishops, Priests and Deacons* (Toronto, ON: Anglican Book Centre, 1962), 705.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

and buildings. This view is an unfortunate legacy of the past that has often left Anglicans with a mere institutional understanding of the nature of the church.

The Second Vatican Council provided an opportunity for a renewed discussion about the nature of the church not only in Roman Catholic circles, but throughout the church, and not less within the Anglican Communion. The Liturgical Renewal Movement and broad ecumenical dialogue also provided an opportunity for reflection on the nature of the church as new rites for Baptism and the Eucharist were developed, as the sacramental life of the church was generally renewed, and as shared statements at the World Council of Churches and in other forums were discussed and agreed upon. In the midst of these developments, themes such as the priesthood of all believers came to the fore. In the Canadian *Book of Alternative Services*, the congregation welcomes the newly baptized, saying, “We receive you into the household of God. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood.”<sup>5</sup> The church began to move towards a more robust understanding of the whole people of God as the church.

While liturgical renewal did emphasize the priesthood of all Christians and called for greater participation of “lay people” in the liturgical life of the church, the shift did not go far enough. In many situations people were left with the impression that to do the *real* work of the church they would need to do the things that their priests had formerly done. The role of the people of God within the liturgy was enhanced, but that was as far as it went. Reading scripture or leading the prayers in church on a Sunday morning became the highlight of the Christian life in such a way that it unhelpfully disempowered

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<sup>5</sup> The General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, *The Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada* (Toronto, ON: Anglican Book Centre, 1985), 161.

the living out of a Christian vocation beyond Sunday mornings and the walls of the church.

I remain concerned that in the church's desire to make Sunday morning more relevant the focus remains too much focused upon the liturgical life of the people gathered as somehow separate and unrelated to the worship that flows into the lived reality of the people sent into the world. In other words, I am concerned that our focus upon worship in some ways undercuts the living out of our faith in our every day, ordinary lives, when it should serve to support and form the living out of that faith.

This attitude is sometimes present at SJE where there is sometimes a sense that if only we could get our cultic worship life correct (if we could just sing the right music, pray the right prayers, find just the right balance of liturgical style) the life of the church would somehow be transformed. This is the idea that the Sunday morning is the sum total of the Christian life. This unfortunate stance undercuts the mission of the church in the neighborhood and in the world.

### **SJE: A Local Tradition of Mission**

SJE's parish mission statement says that "God calls us to help people become followers of Jesus, equipped for ministry in the church and in the world, through nurture, evangelism, worship and service."<sup>6</sup> Our understanding of our vocation and calling has been enhanced as we continue to think about our mission as a church as a sharing in the mission of Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Five Marks of Mission of the

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<sup>6</sup> The Church of St. John the Evangelist, "Our Mission," The Church of St. John the Evangelist, <http://www.rockonlocke.ca> (accessed May 1, 2013).

Anglican Communion, for example, remind us that “the mission of the Church is the mission of Christ ...

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptize and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.”<sup>7</sup>

At all levels of our church today there is some evidence of a renewal of our missional identity. Yet there remains confusion in the midst of this time of great change.

### Informal Ecclesiology

#### **Reframing the Church**

While some of the less helpful formal ecclesiological understandings of the past are fading in formal discussion, their influence remains informally in some circles. The parish priest is still sometimes viewed as *the* leader and there is often a yearning to return to the days of Christendom when the church enjoyed a special place of privilege in the culture.

For others the pendulum is swinging dramatically in the other direction. The church as an institution is viewed with great suspicion and there is a desire to radically

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<sup>7</sup> Anglican Consultative Council-6, “Bonds of Affection,” 1984, 49; Anglican Consultative Council-8, “Mission in a Broken World,” 1990, 101; all quoted in The Anglican Communion, “Mission: The Five Marks of Mission,” <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/mission/fivemarks.cfm> (accessed May 1, 2013).

reframe the church. Sometimes the necessary reframing is envisioned as being shaped along the lines of the primitive church, or sometimes along the lines of other local churches (often of the type we call “big-box” churches)<sup>8</sup> which seem to be enjoying marks of success. Sometimes the reframing seeks to address modern sensibilities and avoid the embarrassing questions raised by our tradition.<sup>9</sup> Often these reactions are not particularly informed by reasoned theological reflection.

### **Lay Leadership**

Despite this history the parish does enjoy a recent history that includes strong lay leadership. The parish recognizes charisms for many different types of ministry. Within the past decade the parish had a lay pastoral assistant who acted as “Director of Ministry”. This person facilitated not only a busy church program, but the calling forth of the many different gifts for ministry resident in the people of the parish. Lay leaders are visible in all aspects of parish life including its liturgical life. Lay preachers are a very regular feature in Sunday worship.

More recently we have begun to lift up and value the vocations of Christians in the everyday, ordinary lives. Without failing to recognize that Christians have gifts to share for the common good of the community of faith, we want to emphasize that the

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<sup>8</sup> These “big box” churches most often locate in the suburbs and edges of the city where big buildings can be erected. One local “big box” church meets in large multi-screen theatres located among the “big box” stores such as Home Depot and Costco and the teaching is provided by live feed from a site in a neighboring city. These tend often not to relate to local neighborhoods as much as draw people from across the city.

<sup>9</sup> A colleague reported to me that they no longer say the ancient Creeds in his church because the Creeds “raise too many embarrassing questions.” He explained to me that he feels he cannot ask modern people to “believe in fairy tales.” Such a perspective reveals a commitment to the sort of modern sensibilities that I am referring to. I would argue that postmodern people are much less likely to share this concern and are much more likely to know a good story when they hear it.

primary calling that most of us have is lived out within our families, workplaces, neighborhoods, and in the particular practices of our faith.<sup>10</sup>

### **Evangelical and Catholic**

One lay leader in the congregation described SJE as a historically Anglo-Catholic parish is the process of “Evangelicalization.”<sup>11</sup> While that description might have been true at the time, it no longer describes the shift taking place in the parish at the moment, which I would describe as one towards a more missional stance. It is clear, however, that both Evangelicalism and Anglo-Catholicism have left their mark on SJE. If the classic marks of Evangelicalism are an emphasis on personal faith, the authority of the Bible, and a heart for mission, these marks are certainly evident in our parish life. Our Anglo-Catholic heritage is also still very much alive in the love of beauty in liturgy, a high view of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and a strong sense of the corporate life (catholicity) of the church.

From the beginning of Anglicanism there has been a tension, often resolved in what is referred to as the *via media* (or middle way), between Protestantism and Catholicism. There have always been elements within this church that have leaned one direction more than the other. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the polarities were described as “High Church” (Anglo-Catholic) and “Low Church” (Evangelical). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the polarity between liberal and conservative became more pronounced, not necessarily

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<sup>10</sup> At SJE we recently had a series of sermons on Sunday mornings that outlined the basic practices described in Dorothy C. Bass, ed. *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997). These practices included hospitality, household economics, honoring the body, and saying “yes” and saying “no”.

<sup>11</sup> David Little, as reported by John P. Bowen in reply to the author’s blog post at <http://djanderson.com/?p=67> (accessed, September 15, 2013).

always cutting predictably according to High or Low Church lines. My observation in talking to newcomers to SJE, who may or may not have any history in the Anglican Church, is that these old distinctives mean very little. If it is true that younger Christians tend to be less concerned with denominational loyalty, it seems to be also true that they are even less concerned with the party politics that previous generations have thought so important. In this context the *via media* often provides a way to learn from and take the best from our traditions and move forward in a more creative, reasonable and less ideological way. In short, I would argue that SJE's wide experience with churchmanship has allowed it some flexibility in taking the best into its missional journey.

### **A Tradition in Mission**

During the Second World War, the Rev. Canon "Padre" Holmes became the rector of the parish. Following the war and with the beginning of the baby boom it was recognized that Hamilton did not have enough programs for children and youth, especially during the summer months. Holmes had a vision to establish a summer camp as a ministry of the parish in the nearby Dundas valley. The camp, which would include both residential and day programs, became known as Camp Artaban.

The name was taken from the name of the wise man named in Henry Van Dyke's tale, *The Story of the Other Wise Man*.<sup>12</sup> Van Dyke's story is an adaptation of Matthew 2:1-12 and 25:31. In the story Artaban sets off with the other wise men to visit the Christ Child, but is delayed by various encounters with people in need, for whom he stops and offers care. At the end of the story, Artaban almost encounters Jesus on his way to the

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<sup>12</sup> Henry van Dyke, *The Story of the Other Wise Man* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1895), Short novel.

cross, but is again distracted by a person in need. It is revealed to Artaban that he has encountered Christ in serving the needs of “the least of these.”

Camp Artaban not only served the needs of young people from the post-war period and into the 1960's, but it instilled within them the spirituality that was reflected in the Artaban story. The spirituality of service remains a hallmark of SJE to this day.

Another chapter in this missional tradition is also linked to the Artaban name and experience. When a fire that destroyed the Parish Hall in 1990, rather than simply rebuild what had been lost, the parish decided upon a process that would respond not only its own needs—but more importantly—the needs of the neighborhood and wider community. As a result, the site was expanded and non-for-profit, geared-to-income housing was built on the site, with the parish choosing modest facilities in the basement of the new building as its new Activity Centre in favor of the best result for future residents. The housing complex was named “Artaban Place”, a fitting reflection of the spirituality that informed this generous act of service towards those without affordable housing. At the same time the parish realized that more was needed than a renewal of facilities, but a renewal of the parish's outreach, evangelism and hospitality. The reconsideration of the parish's mission meant that it learned from the church-growth movement and program church models.

### **Fresh Expressions and the Mixed Economy**

More recently SJE has been influenced by the Fresh Expressions Movement in Canada and in the United Kingdom (where this movement had its origins). Very soon after the groundbreaking report to the General Synod of the Church of England of the

Archbishop's Commission on Mission in 2004,<sup>13</sup> the Fresh Expressions movement began to get very real traction in the church. The Fresh Expressions movement opened the door to reimagine church for many new contexts. One of the brilliant strokes of the report was its recommendation for what was coined as a "mixed economy of churches." This was the idea that inherited forms of church would need to continue and would be valued, even while the church experimented and found new life in fresh expressions of church. The idea was that both inherited church and fresh expressions of church should live quite happily not only within the Church of England, but sometimes within the same parish structure.

At SJE our embrace of a mixed economy in our local situation has meant that we have been able to continue to offer the various Sunday services as we have in the past, and in addition, be open to planting new congregations that more robustly respond to the local context within our parish structure. It seems to us that the advantage of this relationship is that the diverse expressions of church understand that they have a relationship with one another and that a kind of dialogue is possible allowing us all a place in the mission of God.

It was from the Fresh Expressions movement that SJE learned that it could enter into a process of missional listening, learning from our neighborhood about its needs and discerning where God was already at work. In this process we learned that many young families lived in the neighborhood. Talking with them we learned that some of them were not very interested in our Sunday services or programs because of other Sunday activities and because parents did not want to be separated from their children in different

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<sup>13</sup> The General Synod of the Church of England, *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004).

programs when attending church. We also heard that the pressure of getting to church on time on a Sunday morning was a stress that they would rather avoid.

In response to this need SJE began offering “Messy Church.” Messy Church is a model of church that was also pioneered in the UK as one type of Fresh Expression in a number of contexts. Messy Church is designed for the whole family to be able to experience together. To be sure Messy Church is not for everyone; it does however meet a very real need for people in our neighborhood.

SJE has had other experiments with fresh expressions of church from which we have learned. Not all of these have continued or been “successful” in the terms we normally think of. But we have also learned to redefine success. There will be further experiments. We are able to do all of this work without having to tell people who appreciate the ways in which we worship in our other settings are somehow “wrong”, but valid experiences of worship alongside the newer fresh expressions that are being planted. Although it is sometimes a challenge, our parish family is increasingly becoming aware that we don’t need to all be in the room at the same time in order to experience our unity; our unity is rooted in our identity in Christ and in our shared mission and vision for ministry.

This sense of shared mission and vision of ministry will be enhanced as we seek to articulate our understanding of these over time. As we come to terms with our missional identity—and as we pay attention to both our formal and informal ecclesiologies and their development—this sense of unity can only be enhanced.

## **Towards a Missional Ecclesiology for the Missional Parish**

In the remainder of this paper I would like to argue for a missional ecclesiology that acknowledges that the people of God, the church, are both sent and settled, that they share the beautiful life of God, and in the world in which they live are called share that beauty as artists, citizens and philosophers.<sup>14</sup>

### The Church: A Community of Peculiar Beauty

My friend, Emily Hill, who is completing a Ph.D. in English literature, recently asked me, “Why is there not more beauty in theology?”<sup>15</sup> Ms. Hill is a specialist in the diaries of nineteenth century women whom we might think of early feminists, some of whom resisted the status quo and conventions of Victorian society by breaking through structures of class and gender to care for the poor, the sick and marginalized. In their own time these women were thought of as peculiar, odd and queer.<sup>16</sup> Many of these women were driven by a particular Christian religious perspective. The particular Christian perspective of these women was not, however, one that necessarily resonated with the church of their time (which languished in captivity to Christendom). Because of these women’s association with those on the edges of society, and because of their own

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<sup>14</sup> Duane K. Friesen, *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City: An Anabaptist Theology of Culture* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000). In this work Friesen argues that the description of the church as “resident aliens” as in Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), does not adequately account for the engagement of the church in its host culture. Friesen proposes the postures of artist, citizen and philosopher to account for the church’s posture towards culture, which I adopt as part of the missional ecclesiology being proposed in this paper.

<sup>15</sup> Emily Hill, in conversation with the author, Hamilton, ON, March, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> The use of the word “queer” has multiple, yet related, meanings. While in the contemporary context the word is used almost exclusively in relation to homosexuality, the word previously was used to refer broadly to things considered odd or peculiar (which in that context might have included homosexuality). In reference to the 19<sup>th</sup> century women studied by Hill, both meanings may be implied, but the use of the word is intentionally ambiguous.

peculiar practices, these women often found themselves marginalised and despised. Hill's interest in the Christian faith of her diarists and in her own Christian faith has led her to read a great deal of theology, from not only the Victorian period, but also more recent feminist and "queer theologies".<sup>17</sup> Her observation was simply that beauty was lacking in these theologies when she had an intuitive expectation that talk about God should be beautiful.<sup>18</sup>

Hill observes that, of course, Jesus himself was peculiar, odd and queer and that as such the women she has come to know through her research were a much better reflection of the life of Jesus than the church of the Victorian era or of our own. I will return to talk of these "queer" folk and also to the place of beauty in theology below.

### **The Church: Sent and Settled**

SJE: "The Rock on Locke"<sup>19</sup>

The Church of St John the Evangelist are a people who are both "sent" and "settled." We are *settled* in the sense that we are people who reside, live and often work in a particular neighborhood of west downtown Hamilton. Some of us live within families, others are single people. All of us have networks of relationships both within the church and without, people we work with, go to school with, neighbours and other

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<sup>17</sup> The term, "Queer Theology," refers to a field of study taken from the perspective of Queer Theory, and is a form of criticism exploring the Bible and theology from the perspective of those most marginalised.

<sup>18</sup> Ms. Hill could read the likes of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Emil Brunner, Jeremy Begbie, and classically, John the Cross and Teresa of Lisieux; beauty is their way of talking about God.

<sup>19</sup> SJE is often referred to in the neighborhood as "The Rock on Locke" (being located at the corner of Locke Street South and Charlton Avenue West. The parish has adopted the name for its presence on the Internet: [www.rockonlocke.ca](http://www.rockonlocke.ca).

friends. We are each related to people with whom we do business or upon whom we rely for any number of the services that are part of living together in a community. We are settled in the sense that this is the place, and these are the people among whom, we have made a home.<sup>20</sup>

At SJE we try to emphasize that the primary location in which we live out our Christian vocation is within our everyday, ordinary lives. By locating our vocation here we mean that our Christian life and mission are located primarily with our family, coworkers, classmates, and neighbors that we encounter every day. By talking about our neighbors, we do not limit ourselves to the people who literally live next door, but in the sense of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), those we may encounter on any day, near or far, who are in need.

SJE is settled in a particular neighborhood in west downtown Hamilton. Not only is our church building located in the heart of "the trendy Locke Street area,"<sup>21</sup> but most people connected with the parish live within walking distance of the church building. SJE is very much a neighborhood church within a part of the city that very much has a neighborhood identity. Unfortunately there were many years when people in the neighborhood did not necessarily know what the great pile of red bricks at the corner of Locke Street and Charlton Avenue was (it is SJE's church building), but SJE is reconnecting with its neighborhood in significant ways. A recent study of our

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<sup>20</sup> The rich possibilities of life in communities and neighborhoods are explored in John P. McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2010). See also Cam Roxburgh, "Discovering God's Heart for the City," in *Green Shoots out of Dry Ground: Growing a New Future for the Church in Canada*, ed. John P. Bowen (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> This is the way the neighborhood is described by real estate agents when describing the neighborhood.

neighborhood has helped us to connect with, understand and respond to the needs of our neighbors in a much more clear way.<sup>22</sup>

### A People Sent

And yet as the people of God in this place we also have the vocation of a people who have been *sent*. Any adequate understanding of the church must recognize that mission is definitive of what the church is because the church both a *product of*, and *participant in*, God's mission.<sup>23</sup> As Lesslie Newbigin says, to be baptized is "to be baptized into (God's) mission."<sup>24</sup> And so even though we are be resident in a particular place and time, so that it is our home, we are also sent in the sense that we continue to have a mission and alternative vision for life, even when we participate fully in the life of our community. Since the death of Christendom a strong case had been made for the idea of "exile" as a metaphor for the position of the church in North America.<sup>25</sup>

**Luke 10:1-11: A formative passage for the sent church.** Luke 10:1-11 has been a formative text for SJE in thinking about its mission. Parish leaders have spent a great deal of time reflecting on this passage together and a series of sermons where preached in our Sunday services. In this passage Luke describes Jesus sending out his follows in twos to the places where he himself intended to go. In this sense they are *sent* in Jesus' name.

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<sup>22</sup> Some of the results of this survey have been discussed above. We used a tool that is known as "The Community Opportunity Scan" (COS), developed by the Diaconal Ministries of the Christian Reformed Church in Canada. We used this tool in concert with two other local churches in the neighborhood, one Christian Reformed and the other Presbyterian. For more information, see <http://www.diaconalministries.com/community/cos.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Dwight J. Zscheile, "A Missional Theology of Spiritual Formation," in *Cultivating Sent Communities: Missional Spiritual Formation*, ed. Dwight J. Zscheile, Christian Batalden Scharen, and Dirk G. Lange (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2012), 6.

<sup>24</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 17.

<sup>25</sup> See for example, Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*.

He tells them, however, to take nothing with them for the journey, but when they arrive to enter into the homes of those who will receive them and to eat what is put before them. These followers of Jesus are both “settled and sent.” They settle into the towns by receiving the hospitality that they are offered. As they eat the food—and presumably sit with families—they hear their stories and learn the local culture, perhaps even learning the local dialect. They presumably become friends around these tables where they share in the lives of those who show them hospitality. They are settled and sent. This is a missional posture for the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Life on the Sent (Cutting) Edge of (Slow to Change) Church-Land.** The *sent-ness* of the church takes it in new directions. Prior to the year 2000, I am sure that no one would have thought of any church less likely to be the generator of countless fresh expressions of church than the Church of England. The Church of England, still an established church, seemed the very essence of an unchanging institution resolved to stay the course despite the changing times. That church did, however, come to understand its mission in a new way. In order to respond to the new and different needs of fresh expressions of church new structures of permission-giving were needed. In some cases ancient canon law had to be suspended to allow for the flexibility to meet the needs in new contexts of ministry.

An example from current experience will enlighten the need for more flexible structures. As I have said above, Anglican ecclesiology is spelled out most clearly in our liturgical texts, in the rubrics of our prayer books, The Thirty-Nine Articles, the Ordinal and in canon law.

The promises made by a priest in the ordinal are very clear, where they say, in part: “I do solemnly promise to conform to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Anglican Church of Canada.” As if to emphasize the solemnity of this promise the ordinand signs this declaration in the sight of all.<sup>26</sup> The meaning of the “worship of the Anglican Church of Canada” is clear and none other than the rites authorized by the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada. While it is true that within this inherited tradition there is a great deal of flexibility, there is not enough flexibility to allow for the contextually responsible experiments and alternative liturgies that are needed (and being developed) today. Some clergy feel that they are within the bounds of Anglican worship as long as they have received their diocesan bishop’s permission to conduct the liturgy. While I would agree that such permission is a good safe guard in the present context, I am also certain that there is no provision in canon law for the bishop to give such permission. The matter is the prerogative of the General Synod. Within this tight framework it is not clear, *technically speaking*, that we can refer to Messy Church as “Anglican worship.” Even our service at SJE that we call our “Discovery Service”—which has been in place for more than a decade—must continue to refer *technically* to it as an “alternative” form of worship since it does not conform to the authorized rites of the Anglican Church of Canada. While all of this is technically the case in terms of canon law, most Anglicans would agree that this situation is untenable and understand the liberties that must be taken. It is unfortunate that our formal ecclesiology does not allow for this, even while it is almost universally (informally) accepted.

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<sup>26</sup> The General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, *The Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada*, 645.

All of this formal structure puts clergy in the uncomfortable position of relying upon their good conscience and intentions in essentially fudging their way around their ordination vows in order to do the work we know we are all called to do in adapting the liturgy for local circumstances. Our consciences are soothed slightly when we remember that within the tradition there has always been room for slight variation according to “local custom” and that the church has always had a cutting edge of liturgical experimentation.<sup>27</sup>

In response to these issues the General Synod of the Church of England passed a new canon that basically serves as a “not-withstanding clause” for Fresh Expressions. At the discretion of the diocesan bishop, all but a very few canons of the church can be suspended by what is known as a “Bishop’s Mission Order,” in order to allow the fresh expression to function. This allows the fresh expression to find its way in developing structures for support and oversight to emerge. Such an innovative approach is very much needed in our Canadian situation to allow us the flexibility to become the church that we are called to be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is true that in certain ways the church becomes too settled in its “churchy” ways, forgetting that it needs the flexibility to adapt in changing cultural situations.

### **The Church: Peculiar, Queer and Subversive**

While the church is settled in a particular location, its sent-ness also means that it is never exactly at home within its home culture. As I have said above, the biblical

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<sup>27</sup> For an excellent account of this dilemma from a Church of England perspective, the introduction of this resource from England’s “original fresh expression,” now 20 years old, provides a helpful description: The Grace Community, *Making Communion: Grace Pocket Liturgies*, ed. Jonny Baker and Dean Ayres (UK: Proost, 2012), <http://www.proost.co.uk>, 7-28.

metaphor of exile remains a powerful one for the church in this post-Christendom era. As such the church will find itself in alien territory, especially in the North American culture of consumerism, ambition, violence and radical (selfish) individualism. Within such a context the church has an alternative vision. If, within the United States the phrase, “The American Dream,” can be used as a kind of shorthand to refer to a whole set of expectations and desires that give shape to life: then the phrase, “the Kingdom of God,” or “the reign of God,” refers to an alternative vision that Christians are called to share. Such an alternative vision—and the life that is lived in concert with it—produce a peculiar people. The First Letter of Peter describes this situation.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people,<sup>28</sup> in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge. (1Pe 2:9-12 NRSV)

The unique situation of Christians in relation to their surrounding culture is also attested to in the *Epistle to Diogenetus*, where a second century writer notes that those he describes as Christians embrace the local culture, sharing its language, customs and life and yet still live in such a way that makes them seem like strangers.

For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. . . . But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell

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<sup>28</sup> The Authorized Version of the Bible, also known as the King James Version, has “peculiar people.”

in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. . . . They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.<sup>29</sup>

Today's Christians will share a great deal with the culture into which they are born, speaking the same language, dressing in the same manner, celebrating the same holidays and keeping many of the same customs, but they are called to do so as peculiar people within that setting. Like the women who are the subjects of Emily Hill's research, who lived according to a different vision, who eschewed the status quo, and lived radical lives of compassion that crossed the boundaries of race, gender and social status, Christians also are called to differ. As the 1 Peter 2:12 predicts and the *Epistle to Diogenetus* observes, Christians may be hated and maligned for their difference and yet their deeds speak. The Christian life is an odd, peculiar, different (we could say "queer") way when compared with the ways of the world. When Christians seek to live out of the alternative vision they know as the kingdom of God, when their lives are shaped by God's radical love, mercy, compassion and forgiveness, their way of life will be labelled by others as impractical, utopian, foolish and a waste of time. Yet Christians will know this as the way of life described in scripture as "abundant life," "eternal life," and "the Way"

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<sup>29</sup> "The Epistle to Diogenetus," <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/diogenetus-roberts.html> (accessed September 15, 2013).

of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the beautiful life. It is a life in which the beauty of God is reflected. The church is a beautiful city. “You are the light of the world,” said Jesus. “A city built on a hill cannot be hid” (Mt 5:14 NRSV).

### **The Church: Artists**

If we say that such an “odd” or “peculiar” life reflects the beauty of God, we cannot mean that the Christian life is always—or even mostly— pretty. This way of life is shaped by the cross! We do assert that Christians have a calling to live a life that reflects the beautiful life of God through the gift of imagination and a number of artful practices that we might call the art of the Christian life.

#### The Beautiful Life: A Life Shaped for the Kingdom of God

Stephen Fowl has written a wonderful essay entitled, *God’s Beautiful City: Christian Mission after Christendom*.<sup>30</sup> Fowl begins with Psalm 150:2, “Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth” (Ps 50:2 NRSV). While in some places the beauty of Jerusalem is described as residing in its buildings or fortifications (as in Psalm 46, for example), it is not the case in Psalm 50. The temple is only building mentioned in Psalm 50, and then, not as a place of beauty, but as a place where the sacrifices that are offered continually are *not* accepted by God because they are not accompanied by justice, fidelity and truthful speech.<sup>31</sup> The beauty of Jerusalem is not her buildings, but in the life her people are called to live.

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<sup>30</sup> Stephen Fowl, *God’s Beautiful City: Christian Mission after Christendom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

Fowl finds that it is not only Psalm 50 that ties the beauty of Zion to the common life of her inhabitants and points his readers to Isaiah 2:2-5,

In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!" (Isa 2:2-5 NRSV)

While Zion is not directly referred to as "beautiful" in the passage, her beauty is described in much the same way as in Psalm 50, in terms of a particular common life founded in such realities as justice, fidelity and truthfulness, among others. Importantly, Isaiah 2 describes this beauty as becoming manifest in some future time. As Fowl says, "The redemption and renewal of the city of Jerusalem is so astounding, so attractive and fascinating, that the world is ultimately drawn to God, by what they see going on here."<sup>32</sup>

Fowl argues that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus bring the theme of the beautiful Zion to a climax. Fowl also shows that this theme is picked up in the patristic period as a way of thinking about the nature of the church and its mission.<sup>33</sup>

When the redemption of the world is described in passages such as Revelation 21, the redeemed city is beautiful in all the ways that are described in Psalm 50 and Isaiah 2. All of this is important for thinking about the church's mission, since in the meantime, between the resurrection of Jesus and the completion of the redemption of the world, to the extent that the church has manifested the common life of the beautiful city—

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 9.

particularly in attracting and welcoming the nations, and in being places of peace and practicing forgiveness and reconciliation—the church is able to give witness to the redemption given through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In this time and place the church is that beautiful city.<sup>34</sup>

### Imagination and a Vision for the Kingdom of God

“Imagination is everything. It is the preview of life’s coming attractions.”<sup>35</sup> While these words are widely attributed to Albert Einstein, they could have been said by any Christian. Walter Brueggemann talks about the art of preaching as an act of imagination where the preacher holds forth a vision of the Kingdom of God, and invites his or her hearers to use their imagination for the different life and the different world that God invites us to share.<sup>36</sup>

*The Art of Liturgy: Practicing Our Imagination for the Kingdom of God.* In a liturgical tradition such as we find in the Anglican Church, and in SJE where the beauty of liturgy is appreciated, it is not only the reading of our ancient texts and the art of preaching that inspires our imagination of the Kingdom of God, but the entire liturgy. The liturgy is, in fact, a drama that rehearses God’s story, the drama of creation, fall and redemption; the drama of the life, death, resurrection, ascension and coming again of Jesus Christ; the drama of God, revealed as Holy Trinity: the Father sending the Son, the Father and Son sending the Holy Spirit, and the Father, Son and Holy Spirit sending the church.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>35</sup> Widely attributed to Albert Einstein; author unable to find original source.

<sup>36</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Word Militant: Preaching a Decentering Word* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 21-34.

For us this drama is encapsulated within the Holy Eucharist itself where this great drama and the reality of the Kingdom is not only imagined, but made real to us by the presence of Christ. In the Eucharist we *remember*. But our remembering is not a mere exercise in thought. The word “remember” means literally, “to put back together.” In our remembering of the drama of salvation, the Kingdom of God is present among us.

*Engaging with the Arts: Engaging the Culture with Imagination.* The aesthetic dimension of life is a crucial aspect of any cultural vision. As such it is also a vital aspect of a Christian’s response to God. If it is the Christian calling to reflect the beauty of the life of God, then the arts will have an important role to play. Aesthetic forms are not only an important aspect of worship; the arts in general help us to express other aspects of life in response to God.

It is part of the function of the arts to foster our imaginations various ways. The arts do that, at various times, perhaps pointing us towards God or a vision of God’s future or at other times seducing us with alternative visions. Christians need to learn appropriate ways of appreciation and responding to the arts, so that “we know what is ‘good, acceptable, and perfect’” (Ro 12:2).<sup>37</sup>

Another member of the SJE community, who is a scholar in English Language and Literature, is Dr. Norm Klassen.<sup>38</sup> Klassen speaks to the artistry of Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, who practices a kind of Christian apologetic within the arts that Klassen himself admires.

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<sup>37</sup> Friesen, *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City: An Anabaptist Theology of Culture*, 170.

<sup>38</sup> Dr. Klassen is an Associate Professor of English Language and Literature at St. Jerome’s University, federated with the University of Waterloo. Klassen’s special focus is the work of Chaucer. He has a project currently underway touching on the arts and apologetics, Rowan Williams and Christian witness in the arts.

The topics of divine otherness, the glory of the ordinary, and freedom provide the substantive content of an apologetic that one can apparently develop by taking the arts seriously. The themes “belong” to the artist in question, but they belong to him too, touchstones in an integrated theology that he brings to bear in imaginative interpretive activity. In effect, one can start in any number of places to find Williams engaging in Christian apologetics through the arts, and a deepened understanding of his themes will encourage one in one’s own.<sup>39</sup>

For Rowan Williams the arts provide a rich place of engagement with the imagination of the culture in which we live. This engagement may have to do with the beauty that I have discussed as part of the life of God, or it may be with other aesthetic expressions that disorient us and have us asking questions we might rather avoid, about our own broken lives, pain, suffering and uncertainty.<sup>40</sup>

### **The Church: Citizens**

Christians reflect the beautiful life of God as artists. They also reflect the beauty of life in the manner in which they live their lives as citizens.

### **Resident Aliens**

Psalm 137 and Jeremiah 29 call for the people of God to participate in the life of their new home in exile, partnering in God’s work of restoring the all things to the wholeness God intends. The exiled may embrace many of the features of the local culture in which they find themselves, but they participate within that culture with a view towards an alternative future. Not all features of the local culture are consistent with the vision of life which Christians share through their participation in God’s mission in the

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<sup>39</sup> Norm Klassen, “The Art of Apologetics: Rowan Williams and Christian Witness in the Arts” (Unpublished paper, St. Jerome's University, Waterloo, ON).

<sup>40</sup> See Rowan Williams and Monica Capoferri, *The Lion's World: A Journey into the Heart of Narnia*, Kindle ed. (New York: Oxford Univeristy Press, 2013), loc. 148. Also, Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections*, Kindle ed. (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1995), loc. 1645.

world. Indeed, the church may often weep as the Hebrews did in Babylon (Ps 137). When the dominant message of the surrounding culture is one of violence, ecological destruction and out-of-control materialism, the church sings the Lord's song—an alternative vision and message of hope for the future—and weeps for the violence and destruction which surrounds it.

One of the ways that Christians sing their song in a foreign land is when they express an alternative view to the western consumerist society. John McKnight and Peter Block observe that North American society has converted its citizens into consumers and that “the essential promise of a consumer society is that satisfaction can be purchased.”<sup>41</sup> They go on to say that the consumerist culture has inculcated the belief that “what is fulfilling or needed in life can be bought—from happiness to healing, from love to laughter, for rearing a child to caring for someone at the end of our life.”<sup>42</sup> The church has a role to play in being and becoming the sort of community that holds out an alternative in the neighborhood. McKnight and Block refer to this alternative becoming possible in the shift from the consumerist way of consumption and scarcity, to the citizen way of cooperation and abundance.<sup>43</sup> The best hope for the culture we live in is a vision for life firmly grounded in a view of God, embodied in Jesus Christ and in an alternative community called the church.

As a people in exile the people of God live as dual citizens. In the Letter to the Ephesians we are told, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are

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<sup>41</sup> McKnight and Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*, 9.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 11-18.

*citizens* with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone” (Eph 2:19-20 NRSV). We are citizens of a vision of life called the Kingdom of God. And yet Paul also claimed his Roman citizenship by demanding the rights that it afforded him.<sup>44</sup> Like Paul we live as citizens of two societies.

In the same sense that the church is odd, queer and peculiar, even when it is at home in the culture gives the church is *prophetic* identity. The decentering word that continues to create the church, calls it deeper into the life of Christ, and deeper, therefore, into the foolish ways of the cross. But it is precisely this difference that exposes the world’s ways of violence, exclusion and injustice.

#### Modes of Pubic Engagement

Christians may engage society in a way that helps to shape opinion through its witness and participation in society. The church does this ...

- By unmasking the myths of society that perpetuate violence and selfishness by challenging the truthfulness of the society’s narratives;
- By engaging the society simply by being itself and living out of its alternative vision;
- By participating in the democratic process, working in partnerships with one another and sympathetic partners to promote positive change;
- By engaging in the politics of resistance and protest;
- By making a difference through service in our community, meeting real human needs;

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<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Acts 21:39; 22:25 and 25:10.

- And by engaging in our vocation and every day, ordinary lives in such a way that we contribute to the common good and partner with God's mission in the world.<sup>45</sup>

One way to think of the church's presence in society embodied in the lives of Christians who live their ordinary, everyday lives engaged in society is through the narrative of the Incarnation.

If ... Jesus Christ is the supreme act of divine intrusion into the world's settled arrangements, then the church is especially the church when its members scatter in their various places of employment and practice the professions with the institutions of our society, within political and economic life. The church is the church as members work with other in voluntary associations that seek to bring about change in society. It is the church when Christians propose policies to meet basic needs of human beings, as well as when they seek to write laws and administer laws to meet these needs.<sup>46</sup>

### Doing Justice

Any Christian view of citizenship must also take into account the biblical call to do justice. As Friesen observes, "Marx's slogan, 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his need,' echoes a theme in the Book of Acts."<sup>47</sup> In Christian theology we refer to "God's preferential option for the poor."

Christians must work for justice, but past injustices cannot simply be forgotten. A passion for justice must be motivated by love and made complete by forgiveness.

Anglicans were among the first to offer the First Nations peoples of Canada a formal apology for the legacy of Indian Residential Schools. Many Anglican institutions were

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<sup>45</sup> These six ways of engagement are outlined by Duane Friesen in: Friesen, *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City: An Anabaptist Theology of Culture*, 214-18.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

complicit in the nation's injustices towards the First Nations people. Children were forcibly removed from their homes and sent to the schools, many children were physically and sexually abused, and there was an official government program to erase the indigenous language. Anglicans have marked their repentance through a costly financial contribution towards a healing fund. Healing can only come when we take responsibility for our sin and guilt.

When we have identified with those who have suffered injustice, Jesus provides us with a model for forgiveness. As Miroslav Volf puts it, "In the presence of God our rage over injustice may give way to forgiveness, which in turn will make the search for justice for all possible. If forgiveness does take place it will be but an echo of the forgiveness granted by the just and loving God."<sup>48</sup>

### **The Church: Philosophers**

The postmodern world of ideas in we find ourselves in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been likened to a carnival, with various hawkers calling out from every direction trying to invite us in for the show, or to buy what they are selling. In the cacophony of competing ideas, Christians must not only be careful to understand the driving ideas, convictions and beliefs that drive their own lives, but seek to find a way to engage the culture in matters that matter.

### Love of Wisdom

The biblical wisdom tradition teaches that God's wisdom is available to all human beings. As such, God's wisdom is the epistemological basis for all people and is based

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<sup>48</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 124-25.

upon a Trinitarian view of reality: the creator God who is God of the entire cosmos; the Christ who is the Word, the revelation of God within the cosmos; and the Spirit, God's creative energy present within the cosmos. In recent years, biblical scholars have revived interest in the significance of the wisdom tradition in speaking about God's vision for the world.<sup>49</sup> The Wisdom Literature addresses such matters as what practices shape the wise or prudent life and what such a wise life looks like. It also addresses such important questions as the meaning and purpose of life, the problem of suffering, and how the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ figures into these and other important questions. The wisdom tradition provides a way to think about issues that are almost universally important to people.

#### The World of Ideas

The world of ideas, belief, thought and reason are part of what shapes and informs our everyday experience of the world. Does life have meaning and purpose? If so, what is the purpose of life? What does it mean to live a good (or beautiful) life? Do people get what they deserve, or is life basically unfair? These are the sorts of questions around which most people will have firmly held answers, even though they may not have given a great deal of attention to these matters over time. Unless we have been students of philosophy, it is very likely that most of us have never taken a course where we considered these critically. Nevertheless, we will have convictions regarding these matters and these convictions will influence the shape of our daily lives.

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<sup>49</sup> Friesen, *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City: An Anabaptist Theology of Culture*, 253.

For example, if we believe that meaning and purpose in life is basically derived from being able to climb the “ladder of success” in our field of enterprise—whether success is manifest by such things as money, influence, position or all of these things—this single conviction would have an enormous impact upon the shape of our lives. If climbing the ladder of success is the driving conviction of our lives we are likely to look at co-workers as competitors and we will as a result likely find ourselves unable to work cooperatively. Likewise, we are likely to evaluate how happy we are in our family life on the basis of how well our family helps us advance towards our goal. If our family helps us we are likely to be happy. But if our family complicates our lives to the point that it interferes with our climb up the ladder, we are likely to be discontented. Even our membership in voluntary associations such as the church would be colored by such a conviction. If the church helps us in our climb up the ladder, or even just helps us deal with the fallout from the pursuit of this goal, we are likely to be happy. However, should the church ever challenge the appropriateness of such a fundamental conviction, we might become frustrated by the church’s interference in our life.

The above example illustrates the possible influence of one idea, conviction or belief. The reality is that our lives are shaped by multiple—and sometimes conflicting—convictions all time. Christian are those whose lives are shaped by certain convictions that give shape to a life formed in the image of Christ. Romans 12:1-2 speaks about a counter-cultural renewing of our minds that allows the Christian responding to God’s goodness to know a better way.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed *by the*

*renewing of your minds*, so that you may discern what is the will of God—*what is good and acceptable and perfect.*” (Ro 12:1-2 NRSV, emphasis added.)

The world of thought, beliefs and ideas are more than mere mental operations; they have a profound influence upon how we see the world and how we behave in it.

As such, the process of “renewal” that the passage from Romans speaks about should involve Christians carefully examining the core beliefs that shape their lives, and asking whether these are consistent with the faith they have received. A helpful approach is to consider if someone were to look at our lives, what they might conclude are the convictions that undergird our actions. Engagement with these matters has import not only for the process of Christian formation, but in discourse with the wider culture. More to the point, these fundamental ideas, beliefs and convictions that shape our lives have import not only for people in general, but for all sorts of particular people, such as the very people who make up the community of faith we call SJE. And these matters not only have import for them, but for the people they are related to, the people with whom they are neighbors, with whom they work, with whom they conduct business and commerce, with the entire network of people they encounter in life. As the church pays close attention to the matters that shape its life it opens up new dimensions of conversation in the neighborhood. The church’s life—including the individual, ordinary lives of its members—will be synonymous with its mission, just as the life of Jesus was synonymous with his own.<sup>50</sup> To put it another way, our engagement with these matters and how they shape our live, will be a deepening of our own life in God, and therefore our mission with

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<sup>50</sup> Williams, *Short A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections*, loc. 3470.

God. As Rowan Williams puts it so well in his pithy statement, “There is no gap between the gospel and our life together.”<sup>51</sup>

### Words, Deeds and Mission

Discussion of matters that matter are an important aspect of the church’s engagement in mission. The church’s mission—as the mission of God—is a holistic vision that seeks the flourishing of each person and community. The good news of the reign of God is a vision for life as it was intended to be lived. The good news of Jesus Christ is that God has entered the world decisively to restore all things to wholeness. Christian mission is not about convincing people to believe the correct doctrines. But people do become Christians when they are convinced by the truthfulness of God’s vision for the world and the story of God’s restoration of life.

As such, the church serves as sort of epistemological key for the gospel. Drawing from and responding to Alisdair MacIntyre, Lesslie Newbigin explains, “Reason does not operate except within a continuing social tradition which cannot be understood as purely cerebral operations unrelated to the ongoing experiences of the community which carries this tradition forward.”<sup>52</sup>

If this is the case then Christian mission will carry certain intelligible content. But that content will only become fully intelligible when embodied (or incarnated) in a community of people among whom this truthful way is lived. The truthfulness of God’s

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., loc. 3552-53. For a discussion of what Williams calls “The Practice of Dispossession,” see, Christian Sharen, “Practices of Dispossession: The Shape of Discipleship in a Church Taken, Blessed, Broken, and Given,” in *Cultivating Sent Communities: Missional Spiritual Formation*, ed. Dwight J. Zscheile (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2012), 119-22.

<sup>52</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 58. See also, Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), Chs.18, 19.

vision and story demands an incarnation, not only in the historical person of Jesus, but in the present reality of the church that lives out of this vision and story. The exhortation attributed to St. Francis is instructive: “Preach the gospel always; if necessary use words.”

The life of God is beautiful. Its beauty is in the very character of God. God invites the creation to the beautiful life, to return to the beautiful life. The beautiful life of God can be seen wherever the Kingdom of God is manifest in wholeness, peace and justice. The church, in its health and in its brokenness has been called by God to be a sign of the reign of God, not for itself, but for the sake of the world that God loves.

SJE is a community of people seeking to live out that calling its particular place. It draws from a rich tradition in which it knows the story of God to be true and it seeks to live that story as it finds its peculiar and prophetic place, practicing the beautiful life and engaging in the neighborhood with others as fellow artists, citizens and philosophers.

### **Sharing this Vision**

A vision *for* the church in the world must also be a vision *of* the church, and *by* the church.<sup>53</sup> While the ecclesiology that I have outlined here has emerged out of my own spiritual formation and theological commitments developed over time. This development has happened within the community known as the church. Most recently my own understandings have been shaped by my formation and leadership within the community known at SJE at is seeks to come to terms with its mission in a particular neighborhood in west downtown Hamilton, within the greater city and in the world.

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<sup>53</sup> At the risk of seeming “odd,” the Canadian author paraphrases one of the last lines of Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address.

During the past seven years the people at SJE and I have journeyed together and we have learned a great deal about God, who we are (uniquely and in Christ), about our neighbors and about God's calling upon us.<sup>54</sup> As we diligently asked these questions we found ourselves draw deeper into God's mission in our neighborhood.

Much of the vision I have described in this paper has grown out of our shared life together, drawing from the experiences that both SJE has had over time (for example, the "Artaban" spirituality), my own experiences and study. Our shared vision has been clarified through our reading and mutual interest in the Missional Church Conversation. Much of this vision has also emerged as we have sought to discern the call of the Holy Spirit through such practices as "Dwelling in the Word,"<sup>55</sup> scripture reading and conversation. This journey will continue and as such the ideas, beliefs and convictions about the nature of the church—and our lives shaped by these—will continue to be shared, formed and grow.

Having been able to articulate this process and our learning along the way has been a useful exercise and this paper will be shared with the Parish Journey Team accompanying me in this course of study, and will be posted on my blog for this purpose.<sup>56</sup> Once I have received feedback on the paper, to be sure that it speaks to us and the mission that God has given us as a people in this particular neighborhood, the paper

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<sup>54</sup> One of the tools we have used in this journey was the resource found in Gilbert R. Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2003). In particular we paid attention to three renewing questions: (1) Who are we? (2) Who is our neighbor? and, (3) What is God calling us to do?

<sup>55</sup> As described by Alan Roxburgh, *Practicing Hospitality: The Workbook*, PDF ed. (West Vancouver, BC: Roxburgh Missional Network, 2010), 17-18.

<sup>56</sup> See the author's blog for matters missional at <http://djanderson.com>.

may be shared with those interested on the Parish Council and with my local colleagues in the Anglican Diocese of Niagara.

As this vision is shared, I pray it will also be lived, and that as it is lived we will grow further into the image and likeness of Christ and the beautiful life of God.

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