

Mission Rather Than Maintenance

Vision and structures can help renew congregations by focusing energies on the most important point: helping Jesus make disciples. A radical (or “root”) vision of Christianity is based on a call to mission and requires a significant change of heart. We can use a vision of vibrant congregations where people may “Come and See Jesus, Come to Know Jesus and Come to Serve Jesus” as a standard to evaluate and reform church structures. Each congregation needs to identify with this vision, defining what it means in their own context and how they particularly feel called to their mission.

Many congregations operate in a maintenance mode, focusing inward on maintaining themselves. They ask, “Can we afford to do this?” even before they have asked, “Are we called by God to do this?” Frequently, churches are tempted to use a shortage of money as an excuse for not doing things they need to do. Some congregations have come to see denominational aid or use of endowments as ongoing necessities rather than as a way to new life. As churches scramble for resources, they may be tempted to think in terms of “us and them” and start to act parochial and fragmented.

Clearly, these statements are generalizations that are neither true for every congregation nor wholly true for any congregation. I am continually amazed to see the work congregations are doing and the energy they are putting in. But there are at least symptoms of a maintenance or survival mentality in many churches.

A mission focus is proactive. It is easier for us to lead proactively because we have an agreed goal or standard to lead by. We lessen the situations in which we need to be reactive. We are more focused outward to what we are called to do, which is to bring others into the faith and support them in their journeys. We become healthy and grow, not just struggle to maintain where we are.

A mission focus helps us become more connected. With a common vision we can share our resources and support one another. By getting on the same page, we can become a larger supportive community. We can act more like the body of Christ.

A mission focus helps us to use our resources more effectively. We are better stewards and more accountable for the gifts we receive because we use them for a decided purpose and prioritize our activities to best accomplish that purpose.

Each of these reasons for becoming mission-focused is somewhat selfish; we do it because it helps us out as churches. But the real reason we need to be mission-focused is that churches that help Jesus make disciples transform people’s lives. By helping Jesus transform other people’s lives, we also transform our own.

This focus on vision and structure is the beginning of a spiritual journey, a process of repentance, prayer, worship and love. We need to listen for ways we can become more conscious in our church life that Jesus is with us always. The vision calls us to witness more and to work together more on our common mission.

Church structures are never an end in themselves but always only a means to an end. We need to regularly evaluate their effectiveness. We need to adapt church structures to encourage mission rather than maintenance, to create supportive relationships within the church community, to involve more gifted individuals in the mission of the Church, and to create a change in attitude about all that we do. We need to intentionally bring about our desired culture – focused on mission and supportive community – and to discover ways to help Jesus make more disciples through our community.