

Come To The Table: Landing the Missional Church in Canada

A Summary

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Come To The Table: Landing the Missional Church in Canada is a comprehensive reflection of the complex dialogue surrounding the question of church and mission in the Canadian context. A strong undercurrent throughout this reflection is a deep concern for the perpetuation to the next generation of vision and capacity for the fulfilling of God's mission of reconciliation through the presence and proclamation of His kingdom in Jesus Christ.

The Table speaks to the place Christ has given us to come together, no matter who we are, where we have been, what we have done, how old we are, where we might be heading, and what we might be believing at this moment in time. It is the place where we can dialogue, be silent, contribute, receive, accept and be accepted and through a little piece of bread, for a moment, forget all of our differences and celebrate our oneness and our call. It asks, "Who will we invite to the table? Will we invite the same people that the Head of the table invites? What attitudes will we bring?"

Come to the Table takes us beyond a models-based ministry focus to the heart of God for people and his passionate longing to be in relationship with them, and to see them in kingdom relationship to one another. It recognizes that the tendency in Canada towards model-based ministries, methodologies and perspectives originally rooted in American culture, and structured in segregation by interests and ages, has significantly failed to produce life-long disciples and well-equipped faithful leaders. In response to four key questions, it offers an invitation to consider anew what it means to be the missional church in Canada:

- What is the essence of the missional church i.e. what is it in terms of theology, ecclesiology and sociology?
- What is the cultural context of the church in Canada and the subsequent implications for ministry?
- What is the reality of the church that ministers in this culture and is influenced by this culture?
- What is the role of children and youth now that will lead to the future perpetuation of the missional church in Canada and through the Canadian Church to the world?

Each question on its own is a major endeavour. At this point what is offered is an aroma, perhaps a taste that can stimulate further discussion and interest in more research, dialogue, thoughtful reflection and practical application.

The language of "mission" and "missional church" can be confusing and since there is not likely going to be a suitable standardization of the language, the key to being involved in the

dialogue is to understand how people use the terms. At the very least, “mission” and “missional” are calls to leap into something that is bigger than us and beyond our capacity to manage.

In the journey we discover many of the barriers to mission that we create as we wrestle between surrendering to it and seeking to bring it under our control. Barriers of self-protection, misunderstanding, misinterpretation, resistance, and self-interest are continually confronted by a call to ongoing conversion as an essential witness of mission and missional character.

Darryl Guder, in his book *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* suggests “the possibility that our confrontation with the mission of God might broaden much that is most cherished by us in our particular traditions.”¹ It also includes the probability that the church will find itself stretched beyond what it had bargained for and may respond in ways it never thought it would. Yielding to the mission of God will not necessarily put a church or the individuals in it, front and center. In fact, what is more likely to happen is that the church will become more hidden than it has ever been except to those who are in it, and to those with whom it is willing to walk.

Mission is not new but there is a renewed awakening that will mean more than tweaks of the system; rather it calls us to a major overhaul that reorients our worldview and our perspective of others, particularly those who have been excluded or their roles minimized both through our understandings and practices of “church” and through the systems we have erected to support those understandings and practices.

Mission is more than being community/outreach/socially oriented. It is more than about getting out there with a new awareness of God’s heart for people’s needs and having a revived willingness to share time, energy and resources to help them even if that is as a witness to God’s mission to reconcile people to Him. Mission involves an ongoing conversion and a “sliding over in the pew” rooted in deepening understandings of kingdom, sin, the gospel, community, authenticity and vulnerability. It is about breaking down the walls of “us” and “them” and seeing that we are all in desperate need of God’s mission to continually reach into our lives. It is about seeing other people’s struggles as the result of how we all do life. Thus, it has to be more than about “getting out of the pews and into the streets”. It has to include our willingness to “bring the streets back into our pews” and into our leadership, effecting our own ongoing conversion alongside the conversion of others. This must include our willingness to slide over and make room for those whom we are making contact with whatever their life experience, proclaiming them as equal to us in all ways.

A missional church is about living outside of the boundaries of “clean” and “unclean” and “insiders” and “outsiders”. Only in this place of freedom can we see that we don’t even have a life to offer to others if we do not embrace the struggles of others as our own; that their struggles reveal the needs of our own hearts. When we do this we begin to learn to use those struggles to plead together with them before God for each other’s redemption.

The world is not looking for a church that does not sin but for a God that knows how to handle sin and the church’s witness of and participation in mission reveals that God. Also, the

¹ Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, p. 133.

church's pursuit of the compassionate heart of God will tell the world whether the church will plead with them for redemption or stay separate from them except to lend a helping hand every now and then.

What we have then is God on a mission to reconcile, restore and save people for his kingdom, and the evidence that his mission is, and will continue to be, a success is the church. Then, in grace, he incorporates the church not only as evidence but as an active witness through whom he can continue his mission. That church is considered missional when it yields to and proclaims the necessary ongoing conversion through which God effects the shedding of, among other things, the many barriers to his mission including the misunderstandings, wrong perspectives, orientations and conclusions about him, his kingdom, the church and the world, that people bring into his kingdom as they enter.

The question of culture as the paradoxical context within which the church in Canada exists is also explored. It is recognized that the question of how the church relates to culture is also rooted in God's mission that includes him having a particular view of the world that is different than the view the world would have of itself and that those who are within the church are to give witness to his view.

There is some exploration of the influence of Christendom, Postmodernism and secularism in the shaping of worldview and on spiritual formation. It is also noted that the struggle to integrate what is happening within with external witness is a direct challenge to the Western dichotomies of secular vs. sacred and individualism vs. community that so often lead us to an "us vs. them" approach to life.

Canada is ready for a church that has recaptured its identity, function and purpose in relation to God's mission. Canada, as a nation of nations, and a nation of minorities is on a parallel journey of trying to articulate an identity from which it can know its purpose. The unique characteristics of regionalism, pluralism, and multiculturalism make Canada both a land of opportunity and place of struggle for so many. Though there is an underlying belief that everyone has the same opportunity and therefore should get the same results, the fact that many do not have the same opportunity and are not getting the same results is a source of tension, debate and division. The realities of racism and marginalization are identified as constant witnesses to this.

One tremendous basis of hope for the church in Canada is the nation's orientation to reconciliation that is recognized both within and by the international community as a national ethos. That the concept of reconciliation is already a part of the national language and desire is significant for the church that has been called to be ambassadors of the ministry of reconciliation. The church can take the lead and show Canada the fullness of this.

The children of Canada are identified as a barometer of the heart of both the nation and the church within the nation; the "canary in the coalmine". There has been significant change in the basic demographics of children, who only fifty years ago comprised roughly 1/3 of the national population and now represent just slightly more than one in six. There has also been significant change in the circumstances and context in which children live. Global issues are now a

“backyard” reality, and an explosion of urbanism has radically changed the day to day lives of many children, with more than half of them living in Canada’s top eleven Census Metropolitan areas.

The family in Canada still holds significant value though the structures and definitions of family are changing rapidly. Families are for the most part tight knit and supportive environments for children, with children looking to their families as the primary influencers of their values.

For many families, the need for both parents to work is now a reality and yet there are still many families struggling to make ends meet. Canada has fared poorly as a nation concerning child poverty with one in six children living in impoverished conditions, and in some parts of the country that number increasing to one in four (aboriginal communities) and almost half (49%) for children in recent immigrant families. One expression of this is the issue of homelessness which has been declared by the United Nations to be in a state of national emergency.

There is also indication that many children in Canada are struggling with day to day life; almost one in five children under the age of 15 struggles with anxiety, ADHD, depression or some other conduct disorder. Also, the sexual exploitation, abuse, neglect and violence toward children are documented realities for too many.

Canada continues to wrestle with both protecting and empowering children, and it is again the church that can lead the way. In a nation where children are more a symbol than they are a real cultural partner, the church has the opportunity to embrace and empower children as theological witnesses and spiritual partners in mission. This would give witness that the kingdom of God is not about instrumentality, or intellectual capacity or social position or stages of being but rather about relationship and states of being, the sufficiency of Spirit-filled hearts of faith, and the fulfilling of God-ordained roles essential to the life and witness of the church.

Research indicates that the Christian narrative has a prevalent voice in the nation though response is far greater in terms of identification than participation and the opportunities that children have to explore that narrative are vastly different than what was available even thirty years ago. It will be up to the church to explore new ways of ensuring the narrative is not only heard by children, but that they have opportunity to respond to it and grow in it. A review of many church movements and the denominational response to children reveal that children have not yet gained their biblical place in the church as a whole but where that *has* been recognized by local churches they have an effective witness to their surrounding community and a more fully engaged community of faith with greater capacity for sustaining strong leadership.

For the church to be able to take this lead is contingent upon the church stepping fully into its identity and purpose as articulated by God. This means going beyond an outward individual witness to a proportionate inward communal journey that works hard at breaking down the many ways we divide ourselves. This inward journey is rooted in exploring and embracing our true identity in relation to the Father whose image we bear. It also requires a new understanding of how the church emerges from generation to generation as one church with many expressions, and to be in constant witness of that oneness in more authentic and vulnerable ways through a

deeper understanding and application of community, worship practices (Baptism, Lord's Table and Foot washing) and disciplines of spiritual formation that exclude no one.

The common call to begin to experience community is to look at someone and discover Jesus in them. The next small step, and yet much more difficult than the first, is to let go of our individuality. As long as we think of ourselves as an individual in relationship to another, we will not understand being one, leaving us truly unable to have community with the ones we claim to love, or offer community to those who are seeking it.

If we do not believe we can do this with children in the church, it begs the question of how we can do it with anyone, particularly with those with whom we join in the struggles of life as part of our own survival, for the radical and essential call of the kingdom is to become as the child. As we encourage people to come into the kingdom in response to God's mission, it is the children and how we respond to them that reveal what kind of kingdom they would be stepping into. If it is not vastly different than the culture then the gospel and the witness of the church will not be heard and the church will continue to struggle, never realizing its potential.

When considering missional movement that engages everyone it is tempting to try and identify specific churches and say, "There is a missional church." As soon as that happens, two things follow:

- We set up the church for critical analysis, dissection and expectation that it will never be able to stand up under and the end result is a lot of disillusioned people as they realize "that church" is not all that it was made out to be.
- Similar to the first, is that we turn it into a model of how to be an effective, missional church and then wonder why it doesn't work quite the same way for us; in fact it can turn out rather disastrous.

It is far better to identify a specific activity that churches have engaged in on their journey to understand missional in their context. Other churches can look at the different movements, see one that resonates with them, a kind of "we can do that", perhaps even connect with the church already doing it to learn more about the experience (both joys and pitfalls), and then discover for themselves what it leads to in their own context.

It would be possible to develop a list of activities and say, that is what leads to or makes a missional church, but it is not advisable. Each church needs to discern in its own context how God is asking them to carry his mission within and to the world. Having said that, seven common entry points that seem to provide consistent opportunity for a local church to explore God's design for their expression of mission include:

- Hands-on involvement by senior church leadership for the equipping of all to do the work of the ministry.
- Increasing ownership of all ages in the church to explore and pursue mission together through prayer and bible study.

- Regular Intergenerational/Multigenerational gatherings for worship, witness, community, learning and service.
- Willingness to invite others outside the church to speak into the life and ministry of the church and apply what is learned.
- Intentional teaching of ministry partnership and involvement of all ages.
- Development or adaptation of curriculum to focus on values of missional church and spiritual formation as one body, i.e. common mission, vision and practices in all areas of the church.
- Networking with other churches for resource, learning and ministry together.
- Willingness to be interdependent with those they are trying to influence.

The question that remains forefront is what would be needed to help churches either begin or continue their journey of engaging everyone in God's mission. Much of what has been written here has focused on the essential journey of building true community with the belief that "effective ministry is the overflow of Christ in you" and that all ages have an ordained and essential role to fulfill as active participants in mission.

What this brings to the surface is the need for new models of equipping people for community and mission. Equipping is a primary function of leadership but has not necessarily been the focus of leadership training. In other words, we may be strong on knowing that we need to equip but not necessarily strong on *how* to equip.

Within the church, a fresh look at the role of leadership in light of the scriptural "job description" and a willingness to apply the priesthood of the believer will involve a complementary willingness to look at the structures and practices of the church that are hindering leaders from fulfilling that role. This includes a fresh evaluation of what is truly essential in the spiritual formation of others, and whether it is as complex and specialized as we can make it out to be, or whether a more simple paradigm of "doing life together" is more true and effective. The historical patterns of education using age specific programs and curriculum has not proven effective in passing on a missional worldview to succeeding generations and has left the church in a crisis of leadership in terms of having *enough* leaders and having *effective* leaders.

Two significant leadership surveys indicate that for all of our focus on what leadership is, whether we are talking about position, skills, calling, gifts and/or responsibilities, there seems to be a fundamental unmet hunger for a certain mature expression of spiritual formation to be the more defining characteristic. Remember Jesus? He did not have a formal position. He did not have the formal education that others had. He did not have formal "synagogue ordained" responsibilities. Yet people listened to him and followed him as one who had authority.

Luke writes that "Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and men," (Luke 2:52). Jesus had thirty years of formation which included learning obedience through

suffering and becoming a carpenter. The window we are given of him as a boy in the temple is not incidental; it is for our sake to see that he did not just show up on the scene ready to go. There was a process of formation, at times difficult and painful, that was well underway by the time he was twelve years old.

Leadership is an outcome of a worldview that has been shaped from its earliest roots in the heart of God with an orientation to his mission. This kind of formation does not happen overnight but is the result of a lifelong investment in faith formation and expression, out of which some are identified by the faith community as called and gifted by God to bring leadership to the community.

This kind of formation can only happen to its fullest potential in a context where people truly believe that everyone, including children, (i.e. all the things that we typically divide ourselves by, most consistently age, are not barriers to intentional spiritual formation), can experience conversion, in fact ongoing conversion, and then be invested in for faith formation and expression today, not some time in the future. When we stop looking for leaders within the systems and structures that have excluded so many, and we begin to intentionally build a “deep bench” over a number of years, the problem of a lack of good leaders will disappear, and our churches will be better positioned as witnesses of and partners in God’s mission.

*Read the full report of *Come to the Table: Landing the Missional Church in Canada**

Recommended Reading

On Mission:

Guder, Darrell L. *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000.

Wright, Christopher J.H. *The Mission of God*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006.

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