



MISSION PRACTICE IN A PANDEMIC

The Toler Resource Center for Pastoral Leadership has as its three mission pillars to provide those in ministry the resources that help inspire their calling, encourage character development and equip them to grow in their competencies. Dr. Rick Harvey, Executive Director of the Toler RCPL at SNU, felt that this submission might speak into some pastors' hearts and inspire, encourage and equip someone today; and so, he invites you to read the following – from a pastor's perspective – and, if you so desire, send your thoughts and comments via email to rcpl@snu.edu. (The survey referenced was executed by the RCPL at SNU in May of 2020 as the pandemic was unfolding and is available for review on this site.)

About Pastor Craig:

Craig Shepperd has served as Lead Pastor at Guymon, Oklahoma Church of the Nazarene since May of 2018. Previously he and his wife Anita served as pastor to youth and youth adults in Norman, Oklahoma, as well as the Nazarene Student Center at the University of Oklahoma and the Church of the Nazarene as missionaries in Kosovo and Croatia. Craig holds a B.A. in Christian Education from Southern Nazarene University and a Master of Divinity from Nazarene Theological Seminary. He is in process of completing his doctorate at Fuller Theological Seminary. He enjoys watching and playing sports, reading, traveling, and playing around with his son Jude and daughter Edie.

Thinking Mission Practice

by Craig Shepperd

Recently, I was reviewing a piece of research produced by the Resource Center for Pastoral Leadership at Southern Nazarene University. This particular piece of research was a survey reporting on how pastors and churches are responding to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 crisis.¹ Within the body of this research pastors were responding to questions of finance, church attendance, future in-person worship practices, live streaming practices, etc.

¹ "How Pastors Are Responding to the Challenges of COVID-19." *Resource Center for Pastoral Leadership at Southern Nazarene University*. (Bethany, OK: 2020), <http://rcpl.snu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/COVID-19-survey-summary-51819227cff987a263a1a63f4e70dc7f.pdf>

Now, I confess, I am not an expert on the pandemic, and I am not a super pastor who claims to have all the answers. I am not even sure if I have some answers. However, I do not think we are as helpless as sometimes we may feel. The question that I found most intriguing from RCPL's survey was- "*What resources are needed to navigate these turbulent times?*"

The answer that stuck out to me the most was, almost 55% stated they needed practical ways to be on mission during this season.² I was intrigued by this response. I would say partly because I am greatly interested in being on mission. I have served as a global missionary in Southeastern Europe, and my doctorate is related to an intergenerational missional ecclesiology. More than that, however, once the church loses sight of her mission, she loses the necessity to exist. When the church is on mission, it is the true church. The mission has not changed.

This paper will not be all inclusive. I could say so much more, and more needs to be said. I do not have all the answers so I also doubt I will provide entirely original insight. Now, I do want to accomplish three things in less than five pages. I want to focus in on a definition, a proposal, and some practical handles we can hold onto as we navigate life on mission in this season.

First, what do we mean by mission? In the last thirty years, missional theology has exploded. A few of the contributing factors as to why it has moved beyond scholarship is the rise of the mission trip, a return to responding to social ills, and low church attendance. Simply put, it is "the mission of God to bring about the redemption of the world, or human participation in this mission."³ As we will discover, God is a missionary God.⁴ Jurgen Moltmann states, "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church."⁵ Out of the mission of

² Ibid. 7.

³ Scott W. Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 7.

⁴ See more from Christopher J. H. Wright.

⁵ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*. (London: SCM Press, 1977), 64.

God, however, the church discovers its calling and vocation. This is achieved, I would argue, in word and deed. In our Nazarene lexicon, we would call it evangelism and compassionate ministry. Both of these are necessary, and both of these must be held in tension. If not, mission quickly becomes a factory of commitments or a pulpit of activism. Mission is a reflection of the heartbeat of God, and that heart beats full of love.

Second, I want to offer a proposal. For some, this will be ho-hum, and for a few it may be revolutionary. I want to propose that in terms of mission, the pandemic did not upend the activity of the church. It only expediated the direction church and culture were already going. What do I mean by that? Our society was already becoming increasingly post-Christendom. Read anything from Tod Bolsinger's *Canoeing the Mountains* to Andy Root's and Andy Crouch's work to *Growing Young* and Diana Butler Bass' *Christianity after Religion* and we will discover there is a significant shift concerning church attendance and attitude toward the church.⁶ The days when the church was the center of social life are coming to an end, if they are not already over. The days of bringing in an evangelist to stir a spiritual awakening are waning. However, while I want to acknowledge the grieving that occurs for all of us, it does not mean the end for the mission of the church, because God's work is not over.⁷ I want to propose we are, in many ways, being liberated to fulfill the mission God has invited us into all along. The mission that has been sidetracked and sidelined along the way. So, how might we navigate this mission in this season?

As I wrap this up, let me offer some practical handles that either our church has attempted, observed in other churches, or has helped us imagine new possibilities of mission.

- **Partnerships**- look around you and ask, who is doing things in our community that align with our values? How can we stretch our resources and pull resources together in ways that will maximize mission potential? Do not be afraid to find the places where God is already at work and join Him on mission.
- **Schools**- how can we assist our school system during this unusual season? Even after the pandemic is over, the school system will still be operational, and it will still have needs. Furthermore, the school system is an inroad for mission potential. Will they allow

⁶ This is just a small sampling of the literature out there.

⁷ 2 Peter 3:9

you to make a gospel presentation? Probably not, but the school system provides tremendous relational avenues.⁸

- **Points of Isolation-** how might you minister to the vulnerable and the hurting? Who is it that feels isolated, and how can you serve creatively those that feel abandoned? On two different occasions, we have asked our church to make cards for those in the nursing home. We have created signs for our healthcare workers, and placed them outside the hospital.
- **Think Emotional Health-** our youth pastor led our youth group through two series on anxiety and depression.⁹ What does it mean for us to love God with our mind and emotions? How are we creating space to both lament and to dream? We are not counselors, and we should not try to be, yet we do possess a gospel full of resurrection hope.
- **Think Family-** we have worked tirelessly as a staff in resourcing our families in ways of discipleship and encouraging them to reach out to a neighbor, to have conversations concerning how and who they can serve as a family. We are equipping and empowering the church to be the church. For too long, we have relied on the church as an institution to run programs and do mission for us. We have to give that responsibility back to our people.
- **Think Small-** our consumer culture has conditioned us to believe bigger is better. If it costs more, it must be better. So, over time churches have become about events, big names, and cool construction. “The dilemma posed by consumerism is not the endless manufacturing of desires, but the temptation to settle for desires below what we are created for.”¹⁰ What we were created for is relationship, connection, community. Thus, we have revisited our small group efforts. We have transformed them into intergenerational, missional communities who are asked to identify and complete a ministry of service every month together. Along with that, we ask them to invite their neighbors or friends who are un-churched and church seems scary or off-putting to them. God is still speaking. He is still on the move. If we are open to Him, He can use anything to draw us and others close to Him. May we choose to pursue Him and may we do it together. It is together, in community, we discover how to live into the looming unknown of the future.

In closing, I want to suggest the church may be guilty of social distancing long before the CDC mandated it.¹¹ Perhaps what the pandemic has offered us in terms of navigating our

⁸ Canadian Hills Church of the Nazarene and Henryetta Church of the Nazarene are two churches on our field that are doing some great work with public schools.

⁹ For resources see: “Faith in an Anxious World,” <https://shop.fulleryouthinstitute.org/collections/2020-holiday-collection/products/faith-in-an-anxious-world-a-4-week-high-school-curriculum>.

¹⁰ Skye Jethani. *The Divine Commodity*: (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 53.

mission is an opportunity to reclaim what it means to be a neighbor. Is it possible that we might cultivate relationships in order to demonstrate God's love in word and deed? Recently, I was told I preach on love too much. I find this interesting for several reasons, but for the sake of this article I want to point out the goal is not just to become more loving and more pleasing to be around. God's goal in calling us to love is so we might become a community of people who participate in God's mission to heal the world by reestablishing his loving reign "on earth as it is in heaven." We are not just doing good deeds. We are banking that our reputation in our community precedes us, and that reputation is an accurate reflection of who God is.¹²

So, may we invite our people once again to discover what they are passionate about? What can we as a people offer our community in such a time as this? What must be transformed in us in order that we maintain our mission?

These are all scary questions, I confess. Yet, they must be answered. For some, you may say, "haven't you heard there is a vaccine? The pandemic is coming to an end!" I hope so. I fear, however, church may never look the same, or maybe it should not look the same. In terms of mission, we have been here before. Scripture is very useful in these days to process this season. Church history lends us some clues as to specifically how the early church not just survived, but thrived. "The church as fundamentally and comprehensively defined by its calling and sending, its purpose to serve God's healing purposes for all the world as God's witnessing people to all the world."¹³ The task is now twofold: helping our people bear witness to the loving, salvific work of Christ, and leading in ways that "energize a community toward their own transformation in order to accomplish a shared mission in the face of a changing world."¹⁴

¹¹ Craig Shepperd. "Non-Present," *Pandemic Epistles*. April 16, 2020. <https://nathan1161.wixsite.com/mysite/post/non-present>.

¹² This is not a guarantee and may take work on our part.

¹³ Darrell Gruder, "Walking Worthily: Missional Leadership after Christendom," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 28, no. 3 (2007), 252.

¹⁴ Tod. Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 216.