

THE *Episcopal* CHURCH 



Global Mission Digital Toolkit

What Is Mission?

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What is Mission? A Personal Journey

When we reflect on how The Episcopal church engages internationally, the term “mission” is lifted up as central to this activity. We talk about the church’s mission, the diocese’s mission, mission trips, my mission, the mission of God, or the work of missionaries. But what is “mission”, what are “missionaries”, what is God calling me/us to do? How is God calling the church to share our faith in this global world in which we live?

I remember very clearly when I started my new job as Mission Personnel Officer, I had a steep learning curve and although I had been a missionary for many years I had not delved too deeply into the theology of mission. Early on in my new role, I had asked a question of panelists at a mission conference; “What is the mission of the Church”. One very experienced colleague from the U.K. was not happy with my apparent cavalier use of words, and clearly stated at the beginning of the panel that the church does not have a mission, it is God’s mission. While this argument may seem pedantic and academic, I feel that words are important and that it is equally important for us to have a clear understanding of the foundation of our desire to engage in mission as a Church community and how the goals of our mission endeavors are best served.

Until I began researching this question in any depth, I would begin expounding my definition of mission by saying that mission is derived from the Latin word *mittere*, which means “to send” and is found in the Latin translation of the Bible or the Vulgate¹ and that *missio* is the word used to translate the Greek word *apostello*. The general consensus being that mission, in a Christian context is about being “sent”. It is obvious how we have made those connections and how the word mission has been interpreted as the gospel imperative of the apostles being sent out into the world. However, Troope in his book *Transcending Mission* in talking about mission and *mittere* states,

*Equality of meaning is assumed, because there is similarity in form, sound, and spelling. And yet, though the modern English word looks and sounds like the Latin mittere or missio, they are not necessarily the same word, Troope further states that the earliest translations of the Vulgate do not turn mittere into mission or missionary.*²

Thus Troope argues that

*To base one’s argument on a single Greek word and its Latin equivalence mittere, accentuates “sending” over all other dimensions of redemptive history and activity... The mission tail ends up wagging the whole of Scripture.*³

Although the word mission is derived from the Latin *Mittere*, to “be sent”, it is important to state that this word is not in the Bible. Therefore, the argument for using the word mission

¹ The Vulgate is a late fourth-century Latin translation of the Bible. The translation is generally understood to be largely the work of St. Jerome.

² Ibid, 65

³ Ibid, 67

because it is biblically based, is clearly on rocky ground. However, it is fair to state that being sent is a New Testament calling for the apostles and for ourselves is part of how we are called to follow Christ.

In recent times, there has been an increasing sensitivity to the term mission and missionary, and there is clearly some colonial baggage associated with the term. The Episcopal Church's corporate name is the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, a name formed out of the understanding that we are all missionaries and are all called to being sent into the world. Should we therefore abandon the term mission and missionary?

Historically, the term mission in the church was first used in the 16th century. David Bosch states that

*The Jesuits were the first to use it (the term mission) in terms of the spread of the Christian faith among people (including Protestants) who were not members of the Catholic Church. In this new sense it was intimately associated with the colonial expansion of the Western world into what has more recently become known as the Third World (or, sometimes, the Two-Thirds World).*⁴

In the catechism of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer we read that the church's mission is "to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ". I would argue that we need to take one step back from how we interpret the Church's mission to be, and reflect on our understanding of "God's Mission"

But what is the mission of God, and how are we tasked to participate in that mission? The theology of the mission of God is often discussed using its Latin translation, the *Missio Dei*. This is a theological concept first coined by Karl Barth at the Brandenburg Mission Conference in 1932⁵.

*After the First World War, however, missiologists began to take note of recent developments in biblical and systematic theology. In a paper read at the Brandenburg Missionary Conference in 1932, Karl Barth became one of the first theologians to articulate mission as an activity of God himself.*⁶

Mission Dei was further developed in the Willingen Conference of 1952.

*His (Karl Barth) influence on missionary thinking reached a peak at the Willingen Conference of the IMC (1952). It was here that the idea (not the exact term) *missio Dei* first surfaced clearly. Mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God. It was thus put in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. The classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God*

⁴ David J. Bosch (2011-11-09). Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission (20th Anniversary Edition) (American Society of Missiology) (p.1). Orbis Books. Kindle Edition.

⁵ Stroope, Transcending Mission. 16

⁶ David J. Bosch (2011-11-09). Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission (20th Anniversary Edition) (American Society of Missiology) (p. 381). Orbis Books. Kindle Edition.

*the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another “movement”: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world. As far as missionary thinking was concerned, this linking with the doctrine of the Trinity constituted an important innovation.*⁷

Bosch continues in this argument, *“In attempting to flesh out the missio Dei concept, the following could be said: In the new image mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God (cf Aagaard 1973: 11– 15; 1974: 421). “It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfil in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church” (Moltmann 1977: 64). Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission (Aagaard 1973: 13). There is church because there is mission, not vice versa (Aagaard 1974: 423). To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love.”*⁸

The takeaway from this very incomplete snapshot of the theological debate on mission is that our engagement in mission is best grounded in God’s mission, which is primarily to participate in God’s redemptive love towards one another, with is arguably the goal to be reconciled to God and one another. I would argue that when we think of mission, we should always think of it in this context.

With regards to the use of the term missionary, I agree with Bosch who states that *“missionary presupposes a sender, a person or persons sent by the sender, those to whom one is sent, and an assignment. The entire terminology thus presumes that the one who sends has the authority to do so.”*⁹ The term also is inextricably associated with a time in our history of colonial expansion, conquest and occupation. While I am ambivalent to its use, it is not my preferred term for how the church engages with the world around it. Notwithstanding the colonial association the term limits the enormous breadth of our response to God's calling for us to be a follower of Christ. Following Jesus is not just about going out into the world and sharing the good news of the gospel “overseas”. Following Jesus on the way, on the way of love, is about sharing God’s love with one another. As Bishop Michael Curry continues to say, “Love God, love one another, and love yourself”.

When I began to write this article, I had travelled home to England and was sharing in the responsibilities for caring of my parents, both of whom have had strokes and my mother who had recently come home from spending eight weeks in hospital after her stroke. While it was a privilege to have this time to be with my parents. It was difficult, humbling, and emotionally challenging work to help care for my elderly parents. I would argue that I was participating in

⁷ David J. Bosch (2011-11-09). *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (20th Anniversary Edition) (American Society of Missiology) (p. 381). Orbis Books. Kindle Edition.

⁸ David J. Bosch (2011-11-09). *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (20th Anniversary Edition) (American Society of Missiology) (p. 382). Orbis Books. Kindle Edition.

⁹ David J. Bosch (2011-11-09). *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (20th Anniversary Edition) (American Society of Missiology). Orbis Books. Kindle Edition.

God's call for me, just as much in that setting, as I was when I worked as a nurse in Liberia during the civil war in the 1990's.

Another perspective that I heard from a sermon given by Bishop Bob Fitzpatrick of Hawaii during a visit to the Philippines in 2017 is taken from the Hawaiian word Ohana. My take away from the sermon is that Ohana means family, and usually means family in a most expanded context. Family could include blood relatives, ones expanded family, friends, and members of the community where one lives. The basic premise being that nobody is forgotten or feels isolated.

Similarly, when staying at the home of a bishop in Kenya some time ago I commented on the large number of children running around his home. When I asked whether they were all his children he said very proudly that they were. Some were his own flesh and blood, some were adopted or fostered, but as far as he was concerned, they were all his children and he cared for them all equally, as if they were his own flesh and blood.

Following Christ is about loving God and loving one another, period. We can do this by crossing borders and traveling overseas, we can do this by being a kind and caring person, who lovingly cares for a family member, a neighbor, or a stranger.

Whether you think that one aspect of following Christ is more important than another is somewhat subjective, perhaps the most important thing is that as a community we are not forgetting anyone. It is important to care for the elderly widow next door, to care for the poor in our neighborhood, it is equally important to look beyond ourselves, our own cultural and geographic context. To care for those who are in desperate economic situations, those living in war zone, those who are victims of famine, victims of oppression, victims of violence, victims of injustice.

As a community, in my context within The Episcopal Church, it is important for us to participate in God's calling for us with all those whom we are able to engage with. In my case I focus on international mission but I am grateful for those who participate in mission in the United States, those who work with victims of hunger, oppression, racism, and in support of the most vulnerable in our society.

Mission, as being sent, is potentially too limiting a definition of how Christ is calling us all to follow the way of love. Following Christ is primarily about love, this holds a broader understanding and a stronger foundation as to who we are and what we do as a community of believers in following the way of Jesus.

I see God's mission throughout the whole Bible, both the Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament. The Bible is the story of humanities relationship and understanding of our relationship with God and with one another.

I came into global ministry within the Episcopal Church through the back door; I married into the church and to international mission life and ministry.

My initial motivation came out of my work with non-profit aid agencies and specifically my work in Liberia, providing health care support for people living in the midst of a civil war. Over the

years, I have had a very pragmatic approach to mission. I have skills as a registered nurse, a priest, and an administrator. As my faith grew, I could easily find scripture to back up this basic premise and was naturally drawn to Matthew 25.

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me..... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,^[a] you did it to me.

or pretty much the whole of the letter of James, and in particular James 1:22.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

Or Luke 2:10-11

And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise

While these verses still form a vital part of my theological engagement, I began to feel that I had missed a step, in terms of the rationale for international ministry. In reading criticisms of mission as creating dependency, in it being colonial and paternalistic, in my work with aid agencies and in working alongside my colleagues in Episcopal Relief and Development I had a growing sense that while the compassionate charitable model has its place in our response to a hurting world it is not necessarily the most effective and efficient way to support those in need and that professional aid agencies do a better and more informed job in supporting those with physical needs.

In teaching classes on mission theology and scripture, to aspiring missionary recruits over the past ten years I have begun to look at Holy Scripture as a whole, realizing as Bishop Ian Douglas has said that

The reason why we do not find the word mission, as such in the Bible is because, I want to argue, all of Holy Scripture is the story of mission, is the story of God’s mission. I want to emphasize that the whole Bible, Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament, is a revelation of God’s mission in the world. ¹⁰

My theology on how to follow Christ is based on the understanding that we are all children of God, something that is stated throughout much of scripture. From the very beginning of the Hebrew Scripture we read in Genesis

Gen 1:27

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. God blessed them... 31 God saw everything he had made and indeed. It was very good.

¹⁰ From BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR MISSION Ian T. Douglas “From Called to Sent” GEMN Conference Marist House Retreat Center, Framingham, MA May 19, 2011

Not only are we created in God's image I would argue we are created out of the very essence of God. That God lives within each and every one of God's treasured creation, and therefore we are all children of God and consequently brothers and sisters in Christ. My friends and colleagues often joke that I have basically one sermon and that I almost always manage to include references to our patronage as God's children in every sermon.

While in Liberia and working with both Liberian and international colleagues, I met with so many people who gave of themselves sacrificially, occasionally to the point of death to help those who were in greater need than themselves. When we acknowledge that we are all related and that those who are in the greatest need are as much our sisters, brothers, mothers and fathers as our own blood family, then our reason for being in relationship takes on a whole new dimension. If, as a Christian we fully internalize this understanding of following Christ then we have no option but to reach out and be in relationship with those of our family whom we do not yet know.

We were formed by God, we come from God and God lives within us, and our lives, our stories, our folklore, our legends attempt to understand this reality.

There is a Jewish legend that says that just before God puts a soul into the body that soul is asked to forget its preternatural life, its pre-birth life. And so, just as the soul enters the body, one of God's angel's presses the baby's mouth shut, as a gesture that, during its earthly life, it is to be silent about its divine origins. The little crevice below each person's nose is the imprint of the angel's forefinger sealing your lips, and that is why when you are trying to remember something, during your ponderings your own forefinger sometimes spontaneously rises and rests in that crevice.

There is a Norwegian legend that, before a soul is put into the body, that souls is kissed by God and, during all its life on earth the soul retains the memory of that kiss and relates everything to it.

Throughout Hebrew scripture our ancestors have revealed this understanding of who we are and our relationship with God.

Jeremiah 1:5

⁵“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

Psalms 139:13-16

*For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;*

*my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.*

This understanding of the presence of the Triune God within us continues in New Testament scriptures.

John 17:20-23

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Matthew 5:44-45

But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

Matthew 25:40

“Truly I tell you as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

One could argue as to whether there is a real presence of God within each and every one of us or the meaning of being a “child of God”, I realize that this is one of many theological arguments of our journey with Christ. However, from my experience and from what I have seen around the world in the kindness and sacrificial gifts of one to another, I feel strongly that all humanity is made in the image of God and that we are all children of God whether we are Christian, Muslim, Hindu, black, white, gay or straight.

“Mission theology” has moved from “our mission” and the “Church’s mission” to talking about our participating in “God’s mission”. When we participate in God’s calling for us, perhaps we should consider using terminology encouraged by Bishop Michael Curry, that we are called to be “Following the Way of Love” or “Practicing a Jesus Centered Life’, and remind ourselves that we are the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement.

If you feel called to continue to use the term mission, missionary, missionary then please do so.

However, I would ask you not to put too many limitations on the use of that term; and remember that at the end of the day our calling is to love God, love one another, and love ourselves. And to never leave anyone behind.

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