



**Mennonite
Church
Canada**

Resource Centre

Sermon

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Nutana Park Mennonite Church

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Aligning Ourselves with God

2 Corinthians 5:16 – 6:2

It's good to be here and to greet you this morning. As you already know, my name is Eric Olfert, and I work for Mennonite Church Canada Witness here in Saskatchewan. In case you didn't know, I grew up in the Superb Mennonite Church family and am currently part of the Mount Royal Church family here in Saskatoon. I am married to Verna, and we have two sons Jonathan and Nathan; a daughter-in-law Nikki, and a one year old grandson, Benjamin. It feels good and familiar to be with you today here in the Nutana Park Church family. In many ways, there are still echoes of home for me here, especially because I was baptized here under this roof many years ago by Verner Friesen, who is with us here today, back when I was a young university student.

My purpose this morning is to think with you about this Missional Church thing that has been creeping into our church language, and what if any relevance it might have for us here at Nutana Park church. I'd like to start with a sort of historical/social look at where this Missional Church idea comes from. Then later, for those who see history as just a dead weight we have to drag behind us (and I'm told there are such!) we'll try a more forward-looking Biblical text-based approach.

We should probably start with a look at the book definition of Missional Church. It goes something like: **A church that sees its mission as aligning itself with God's purpose in the world.** This on one hand a simple enough statement. But how would such a church look different from the church down the street? This definition obviously needs further work.

For my purposes this morning, I'd like to divide the history of the church into three very rough and oversimplified periods or eras. The first of these will be the early church, sometimes called the apostolic church. During this period the church was a persecuted minority. It was during this era that Paul wrote to Timothy (2 Tim. 3:12) 'Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.' The larger society was clearly hostile to this new Christian 'sect'. Christianity was illegal and actively persecuted. The playing field was strongly tilted against the church. It was a real uphill struggle to move from society into church, and only the most motivated accomplished it.

The early church responded by adapting to these circumstances. They met in the houses of members. They were careful about whom

they allowed to enter. Alan Kreider, a leading Mennonite scholar on this time, tells us that the early role of the deacon was essentially that of gatekeeper. He was chosen for size and ability to size people up quickly. His job was to keep the non-members out of the service and if he judged them to be genuine seekers, to hook them up safely with believer-mentors who would lead them to faith and baptism, a process which normally took several years.

Every member of the early church understood that each Christian was called to personally live out, witness and share their faith with others in their personal lives. Since they couldn't preach on the street corners, the early church members ended up practicing what one could call 'behavior evangelism'. They acted differently from their neighbors. They acted deliberately, and despite peer pressure, in ways that they felt called to as Christians.

Alan Kreider gives an example: In that time, the plague swept through the known world periodically, killing many people. If you had the means, the way to protect yourself was to move out of the cities to the countryside until the danger passed. Less crowding, better sanitation and cleaner air prevented the plague from spreading as quickly, so people headed for the hills when it came. Christians became known as those who refused to take this option, staying in the city to care for the sick, even the sick of other social classes and nations. Many of them got sick and died as well for making this choice.

Outsiders who observed this asked questions. They wanted to know why? And more particularly; what gives you this power over the fear of death! Authorities of the time complain, in preserved documents, about the Christians always 'whispering in the corners' as they testified to their faith in responding to these questions. And the church, despite the persecution, and the need to be extremely cautious, grew rapidly.

Then, in about 300 AD, things began to change. The Roman Emperor Constantine was much more open to the Christian faith. His mother was a Christian. Constantine eventually made it legal to be a Christian, and the church could come out of hiding. Then Constantine's successor, Theodosius, before 400 AD, made it not only legal to be Christian, but illegal to be anything else. Christians obviously rejoiced, but

turned out to be a momentous change with far-reaching implications, and the beginning of the second era in the history of the church that I want to talk about.

All of a sudden, the playing field, which had till now been strongly tilted against the church, is just as strongly tilted in favour of the church. All of a sudden, every Roman citizen is assumed to be a Christian. It now takes real determination and motivation to resist sliding down the slope and becoming a Christian. All the lukewarm and weak-willed are swept into the church by societal pressure. All of a sudden, you need huge Cathedrals to hold everyone, even though most of them only come on Easter and Christmas and other high church days. Since 'holiness' is less and less demonstrated in the lives of ordinary church members, it needs more and more to be shown in the grandeur of buildings, in the stained glass, in the ornate trappings and vestments of office. The work of the church is increasingly done by an 'expert' leadership, with the majority limited to filling pews and putting money in the offering plate. And let's not be too quick to blame the church for these changes. The changes were largely required by the new circumstances.

And so, over time, the church and State became cozy bedfellows. The state protected the church as an important and respected part of society, and the church blessed the work of the state, including its need to punish its enemies and make war.

This period has come to be called the Constantinian, or more often the Christendom Church. The uniting of Christ and the Kingdom. You can see it in the word Christendom; Christianity working hand-in-hand with the kingdom. Christendom has evolved and changed over the centuries, but some of its essential elements have survived into the present, over 1500 years!

As a quick aside, what was the big church event of about 500 years ago that I am skipping over here? The Reformation, and the Radical Reformation, to which we trace our Mennonite roots. Help me think back to what our Anabaptist forefathers were saying. As I was taught them, the 5 main distinctive calls that separated our forefathers from the church of their time were all strong challenges to Christendom:

- Adult (Believer's) Baptism – a direct challenge to the 'automatic' church membership and

therefore infant baptism of Christendom

- Pacifism – a clear separation of the church from the state's military agenda
- Discipleship of all believers – a challenge to the Christendom Church's total dependence on its clergy to 'do' church.
- Community – a call for renewed commitment & dedication to the community of Christ as a place of discernment and incarnation of the Word
- Separation of Church & State – clearly and explicitly anti-Christendom

But let's come back to the present. Where are we at today? What is the slope of the Church/Society playing field in our society in 2005?

Well, a growing number of theologians of all denominations are saying that Christendom is finally ending in our time. Bonhoeffer, already 60 years ago, was talking about the new post-Christendom church that was emerging. Loren Meade, an Episcopalian writing for the Alban Institute cites a list of respected names from a dozen denominational backgrounds that are convinced that we are witnessing the end of Christendom in our time.

What evidence of this do we see right around us?

- The removal of the Lord's Prayer from Saskatchewan Public Schools
- There has been no crèche (manger scene) in front of Saskatoon city hall for a number of years now
- The Christmas tree in front of City Hall is now called the 'Holiday Tree'.
- The Canadian government's regulations governing charitable donations and the use of receipted money keeps tightening.
- City planners no longer automatically set aside planned plots for churches.
- The government is taking the right to define marriage away from the churches.

If we can at least provisionally agree that we are at the beginning of the post-Christendom era, what will that mean for the church? Well, our society's playing field is no longer strongly tilted in favour of the church. At best it is neutral, perhaps it is/will be tilted somewhat against the church. Our society tends to think of Christianity as a bit old-fashioned, uncool. Many churches have already experienced what that means in church attendance. Without the tilt of the playing field to hold them in, many people with little commitment have left the

church. Those that remain tend to be those who have made a personal, conscious, committed choice to be church members.

That changes quite a few things. Like in the early church, commitment and dedication can again be defining of membership. Every Christian is again, as in the early church seen as being 'sent' and responsible for the outreach of the church. The congregation again becomes, as in the early church, the working unit of faith.

So the question arises: Is this change good or bad for the church? Is the ending of Christendom to be seen as a problem, or as an opportunity? Is it persecution or purification? It has aspects of both, I think, especially in the short run; but in the long run, I am convinced, as were the Anabaptists, that the ending of Christendom will be a very good thing for the church.

Some call this post-Christendom church we are anticipating the emerging church. As Mennonite Church Canada we have decided to use the term 'Missional Church' to identify what the church will need to be in this new era. It's not a newly invented term. It has in fact been in use for the last thirty years or more. Together as a cross-country faith family, we want to discover what it will mean, what the church in this new Missional era will end up looking like.

In the last part of our time together this morning, I want to look with you at a few of the navigational aids available to help us find the path into a Missional Church future. Five core beliefs have been identified that help us better understand God's call to be a Missional church. I'm a teacher by training, so I need to warn you, there will be a review and a test on this section, so pay attention!

Core Belief 1 *The first words of the Bible are: "In the beginning, God created"*

All mission begins with God's initiative. God was there from before the beginning. And God continues to be everywhere. Psalm 139:8 suggests that even if you make your bed in Hades, you will find God there. God is already at work everywhere we might go in the world. In the situations of utmost despair and suffering, God is already there. We don't have to bring God, nor do we have to call God to come. Our job is to recognize God's handiwork, to dis-

cover how God is working. Even in the hardest times, instead of praying “God do something”, we can pray “God, help us to see what you are doing. Help us recognize your touch in all this”.

Core Belief 2 God’s desire is to restore, reconcile and redeem the world.

Our text from 2 Corinthians emphasizes the reconciliation part (see v5: 18-19), but we can all remember other verses where the ideas of restoring to grace, and redeeming or saving the world are emphasized. From Psalms 51:12 ‘Restore to me the joy of your salvation’ to 1 Peter 5:10b ‘The God of all grace...will himself restore, support, strengthen and establish you.’, restoration, reconciliation and redemption are emphasized. This is the broad outline of God’s purpose or agenda. God wants to make the world a place of shalom, a place of forgiveness, justice, peace, well-being, community and grace in the fullest sense of those words; a place of blessing, of salvation. What God is doing is building the Kingdom, not only in heaven but right here on earth. This is Good News. In fact it is The Good News; the most important news anywhere.

Core Belief 3 We are a ‘people of God’ and a ‘people for God’.

The community of faith (the church) is both the goal of God’s plan, the community that will be God’s Kingdom, but also the instrument – the means or strategy through which God is building the Kingdom. In the words of our text, we are both the ‘new creation’ (v: 17) and Christ’s ‘ambassadors’ (v: 20) through whom God is appealing to the world. We are both the means and the end. We are both the workers and the result of the work. The church is to be both the embodiment of the Kingdom, the place where the Good News is put into practice, and the communicator of the Good News. Jesus instructed us in Matthew 10:7 ‘As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near’.

Core Belief 4 God’s People are called to be ambassadors of change

This is straight from verse 20 of our text - ambassadors of reconciliation, restoration and the salvation of the world. We are called to be

different, to be counter-cultural. We are called to be a community of the Good News, living out the Good News and calling others to join us in living it out. In Matthew 13:38 we are told ‘The field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one.’ We are to be a demonstration plot, where the meaning and the implications of the Good News become flesh and blood and are made practical and visible to the world. Some of you have farm background to know about demonstration plots, where chemical or seed companies or sometimes the Dept. of Agriculture try to show us that their products or techniques are not just words or advertising, but are better ‘in the field’ than all the other options. That’s what we are called to; showing the world a taste of the Kingdom.

Core Belief 5 God sends the entire church

Each one of its members and all of its activities into the world to fulfill His restoring reconciling and saving purpose for the world. This is key! Missional means ‘sent’!

The idea here is that we in the church have all received the good news and we are all charged with passing it on. We aren’t allowed to say, Oh! Mary is way better at talking about her faith, I’ll just send her. Loren Mead of the Alban Institute says we are all, each and every individual, called to be evangelists. But for those of us who aren’t that good at talking about our faith, he also reminds us that evangelism means not only verbal witnessing to bring people into the church. In New Testament terms, evangelism means ‘proclaiming Good News’. We are all, each and every one, called to proclaim good news. Mark (16v15) tells us that Jesus’ last instruction to his disciples before ascending into heaven was to “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.”

Jesus always spoke His Good News in response to the bad news in people’s lives. To the blind he brought healing, to the lepers He brought cleansing, for Lazarus he brought victory over death, and to the woman at the well he brought truth and a new beginning. True evangelism is always contextual; that is, it is always related to the reality of people’s lives. It is about supplying the good news that heals the bad news in people’s lives.

Billy Graham speaks to one kind of bad news; that of feeling lost, alone, purposeless and without hope. Martin Luther King brought good news to another kind of bad news; that of racial oppression. When you visit an inmate in the Prince Albert Penitentiary, or the Regional Psychiatric Centre you bring good news to that inmate's bad news of rejection, loss of self-worth and friendlessness. When you volunteer with Mennonite Disaster Service, you bring the good news of caring, hope and a new beginning to those who have lost everything. When you visit a neighbor who is grieving or suffering, you bring the corresponding good news of caring and support. When you visit folks in the nursing home; have coffee with a lonely widower or baby-sit for a single mother, you are an evangelist, bringing good news to their bad news. We are all called to be evangelists, working alongside God to bring the Good News of healing and hope to the world, across the street and across the seas.

So, in review:

- 1 • We don't need to be afraid, God is at work everywhere before we even get there. God is there to welcome us. We just need to join God out there.
- 2 • God's work consists of building The Kingdom; the three 'R's restoring, reconciling and redeeming the world. This is God's agenda, God's purpose, God's mission.
- 3 • Our job is both being the instruments with which God builds The Kingdom, being part of God's restoring, reconciling and redeeming mission and modeling what it will look like, kind of being God's demonstration plots. That's our agenda, our purpose, our mission.
- 4 • If we are to be a demonstration plot of the Kingdom of God, we need to work hard at being different from the crops around us. Quality needs to be job one as Ford ads used to say.
And
- 5 • This will take all of us. Nobody gets to stay home and make lunch, like in the Mennonite jokes. Everybody is needed. God is calling each one of us to the task.

So what do you think? Is Missional church different from business as usual? Is it an exciting way of conceptualizing the church? Can we do it?

Now as we go home and to our jobs, our work, our schools and our lives, let's remember that God is already out there beckoning us to join Him. Let's take a deep breath and all go out and join in God's work, in God's mission. That's the test I promised. Will we take to heart this idea of working to discover what God is doing and joining in doing it during this coming week? I won't be around to give you a pass or fail grade next Sunday, so you'll have to mark your own work (self-assessment, teachers call it), under God's eyes.

Al Rempel, one of my colleagues at MC Canada Witness suggested a question that might be helpful for measuring how we are doing. He suggests we ask ourselves: "**What is my relationship to God doing in my life that my neighbors would be poorer without?**" We're obviously thinking 'neighbors' in the broad sense of the word. And we should all be able to come up with a good list.

Let's challenge ourselves and take the test.