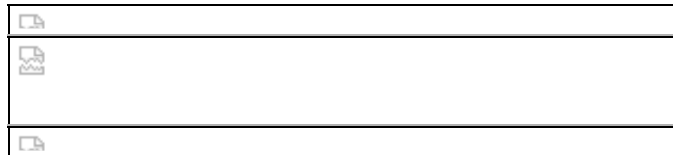


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What is God doing?

Reflections by

Robert J. Suderman
Executive Secretary, Christian Witness Council
Mennonite Church Canada

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A basic assumption in understanding the missional church is that God is already active in the world and that the church is invited into this activity as partners of God. This is a reconciling ministry, meant to restore the world to its original design and intention.

This affirmation begs the question: "what, then, is God doing in the world?" This is an important question especially if, as we say, our purpose is to align our activity with God's activity in the world. Much discernment is necessary in order that our understanding of God's activity is not simply a mirror image of our own preferred busyness.

What characterizes our world?

If we look at the world in which we live, the following elements can be readily discerned. There is:

- An escalating cycle of violent activity and retaliation demonstrated in revolutions, civil wars, guerrilla warfare, freedom fighting, terrorism, civil disobedience, and political destabilization
- A notable increase in religious fundamentalism, in a number of major world faiths
- A re-awakening of tribalism, insisting on insulating ourselves from other truths and isolating our truth from others
- A renewed sense of the spiritual, accompanied by a search for adequate spiritualities; this is evident all over the world in all age groups
- A renewed sense of national identities, that has resulted in the breakup into separate countries of colonial Africa, the former USSR, and eastern Europe
- A move toward globalization, especially in communication, information, transportation, and corporate involvement and influence
- Ongoing oppression and injustice systemically embedded in our institutions and structures
- Significant efforts by minorities, genders, and dominated groups to attain greater

recognition, equality, and dignity

- Resurgence of indigenous peoples to reassert their identity and their rights.

Is God active in these important tendencies that characterize our world?

In light of the September 11th attacks, I have heard several explanations about how to understand God's role in the climate of violence and unrest described above. These are:

- God is not historically active. God has abandoned the world to work out its own issues, and divine intervention should not be expected.
- God is judging the world. Some say that God is judging the Arab world, or the Islam world, or Afghanistan. Others suggest that God is judging the USA. Either way, God's primary activity, according to this view, is that of judgement.
- God is active, but ambiguously so. In other words, it is not clear what God is doing, but we have faith and hope that in the darkness God is doing something.

I want to be bold enough to suggest another way in which God's activity can be discerned in the world. As strange as it may sound, I suggest that God is behind the turmoil we see in the world. God is active in the world, sowing seeds of change. Unfortunately, humans often try to nourish and harvest these seeds in misguided ways, resulting in death and destruction.

Discerning God's activity

It is important to identify some of the seeds that are of God, that appear, at the same time, to be at the root of much of the turmoil we are facing.

- There is a passionate search for and insistence on the dignity of human existence. There is pressure that all human existence should be valued, its worth protected, and its dignity advanced. This, I believe, is seed sown by God.
- There is a passionate search for human freedom and liberation from all forces that make us less than we are meant to be. This, I believe, is seed sown by God.
- Our ability to be passionate about the values we hold is itself a spiritual gift breathed into us. This is seed sown by God.
- There is a passionate insistence on the value of human identity. This identity must be respected because it reflects our self-worth and dignity as humans. This is seed sown by God.
- The passion for dignity, liberation, and identity reflects a corporate, social, and global spirit. It is not simply individualistic passion. This is seed sown by God.
- There is an intense desire for justice to come, for oppression to end, for everyone to be treated fairly, for equality to become reality. This is seed sown by God.
- These human yearnings are profoundly spiritual expressions within human life. This is seed sown by God.
- The "charismatic" self-understanding that undergirds these passions, affirming that all persons have significant gifts, all of which yearn to be valued and affirmed, is seed sown by God.

These seeds are at the root of much of the desire for change that we see in our world. They are at the root of revolution, nationalism, and globalization, and of our search for identity in gender, self-worth, and dignity. These seeds are at the root of the intense search for spiritual renewal.

The Bible shows us that these seeds are of God. God has always acted in favor of such yearnings. We can see these seeds in the liberation of slaves from Egypt and the prophetic pronouncements against oppression, poverty, violence, and all kinds of injustice. We see these seeds in the spiritual affirmation of the value of human creation, in the level of human dignity implied in the affirmation that the created order was "very good." They can be seen in the search for safety, security, and salvation. They can be seen in the repeated attempts to create a peoplehood that would model the justice, liberation, and dignity that we so desperately seek. They can be seen in the way the Bible inter-weaves human destiny as a common destiny in Jesus Christ, and not simply as an individualistic fate. It can be seen in the breaking down of walls and barriers of separation and the attempts to bring everyone together under the Lordship of Christ.

God is sowing these seeds. They are indelible, irradicable, mysterious, but permanent. The perseverance of their appearance and the pressure of their birthing are undeniable. These are not blips on the screen of life. These seeds are at the root of what it means to be human, and as such they are God given. God is in the process of sowing and nurturing these seeds.

Unfortunately, our human and fallen attempts to make ourselves lords of these seeds generate misguided and often violent and oppressive activity. Such activity is evident in the biblical stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the Tower of Babel, the monarchies of Israel, the work of the Zealots, and the exclusion of the gentiles from the blessings of God. While the seeds of dignity, liberation, identity, and passionate spirituality are from God, the misguided and fallen strategies for the nurture and harvest of these seeds are not. In other words, while God plants the seeds that are at the root of revolution, God is not planting the seeds of violence and terror. These are of human design responding to the growth of these seeds.

Implications for the ministry of the church

So now we need to go back to the beginning. If we affirm that the purpose of the church is to discern God's activity in the world and to align its ministry with God's work, then we must ask how the above discernment affects the life of the church and its ministry.

Simply stated, we can identify three key responsibilities of the church:

1. The church should align its ministries with these seeds that God is sowing.
2. The church should resist strategies for nourishing and harvesting these seeds that are incompatible with the seeds themselves.
3. The church should model and propose alternative strategies that demonstrate how these seeds can be nurtured in ways compatible and consistent with the seeds themselves.

Practically, this means that the church will often find itself with strange bedfellows. Nourishing seeds of human dignity, liberation, identity, and self-worth will connect the church with multiple partners. Resisting strategies that do not align with the seeds sown will also connect the church with interesting companions. This helps us understand how Jesus could associate with prostitutes, freedom-fighters, and tax-collectors, nourishing the seeds that God was sowing in them, while at the same time resisting the activities and strategies that were incongruent with the seeds.

Conclusion

God is active in our history. Our world situation reflects in some way this activity of God. The church attempts to discern this activity and align its priorities with it.

God is involved in the darkness of the world. The darkness we see confirms again the fallen nature of our world, but on closer analysis God's light is present in the darkness. The church should not distance itself from dark contexts. It should rather understand the light of God that is at the root of what may seem very dark. The church's immersion in darkness reflects God's own immersion in our darkness. As God's light is present in darkness, so the church needs to present viable alternatives to darkness and let its light shine. This is its missional nature of the church.

The gospel (good news) of the Christian faith can be seen in dark events, yes even in the events of September 11. The gospel is that God is active, sowing seeds that would lead to abundant living. These seeds are sown in soil that is unreceptive to their intentions. There is a community that points to the potential of these growing seeds. The church, through its being and its doing, points to the way of Jesus Christ as a better way to bring life to our struggling world. The important words of Jesus: "I am the way, the truth, and the life..." continue to hold much promise as we reflect on the life of the church in the midst of the world.

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