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Mission as Catalyst?

The prospect of summer is a mixed blessing for many Canadian congregations: the change of pace and the beckoning outdoors is welcome, but offset by the uncertainty of attendance and leadership during Sunday summer worship services.

Dr. Michael Frost, Australian missiologist, and co-founder of the *Forge Mission Training Network*, describes the local congregation as having four functions: worship; making disciples (teaching, correction, small groups); community or fellowship (addressing all the “one another” commands of service, hospitality, etc.); and mission.

While congregations value each of these activities, worship often serves as the catalyst for the other three functions. Sunday school and sermons bring the “making disciples” component close to the time of corporate worship. Community meals, lobby conversations and even the local coffee shop cluster arrange their interactions around the worship. Mission, too, is often seen as addressing the question of how to get people to come to – you guessed it – the worship service.

What would it mean if a congregation were to continue to emphasize all these functions but use mission as the catalyzer?

Frost’s own congregation in Sydney, Australia is located close to a beach with no fewer than 3 surf clubs. His congregation struggled with the dynamics of summer. It is customary for Sydney families to have their young or adolescent children become “nippers” – trained in swimming, life-saving and surfing by the surf clubs. While *nippers* from the community are being trained on Sunday mornings, their watchful parents sip ice lattes at the beach, engaging each other in friendly conversation – coinciding with Sunday worship time.

The congregation viewed this dynamic from the “mission as catalyst” approach and rather than promoting Sunday worship attendance, encouraged all their church members to have their children become nippers and for the parents to join in the

beachside conversation. And they also found another time in which to worship. It’s not that mission was the priority, but rather the catalyst for viewing the other congregational life practices. Those engaged in mission need to be disciplined, they need companionship, and they need to engage in heartfelt worship as the Psalmists did, in praise that recounts the acts of God, and in pain that tells of our deepest longing for healing, rescue and salvation.

This perspective informs the 5 membership commitments of Frost’s congregation. 2-5 member DNA (Discipleship, Nurture and Accountability) groups meet regularly to encourage one another in the activities of: (1) Blessing 3 people each week through favours, affirmation, gifts, etc. – include at least 1 person from the neighbourhood & 1 from the congregation. (2) Eating with 3 people each week. (Same diversity of people as above) (3) Intentionally listen to the Holy Spirit at least once each day. (4) “Learn Jesus” so that you can speak about Him to others. (Gospel re-reading is emphasized). And (5) Identify yourself as a “sent person” (i.e. missionized) and keep a journal of what this means. The impact of this perspective is that these kinds of activities will inform, enrich and stretch the life of the congregation in its worship, disciple making, and community forming activities.

Seeing the life of the congregation through the transforming perspective of mission can also be a catalyst in other aspects of congregational life. David Brubaker, Eastern Mennonite University professor in the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding, notes that “the only change in the congregation that DECREASES conflict is when a congregation begins outreach.”

May the transforming work of the Holy Spirit inspire and empower our perspectives and our activities as congregations uniquely gifted and placed in communities across this country.