

how?

Towards drafting a Congregational Mission Plan

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3 v.16

As we approach the task of congregational mission planning we are seeking to locate ourselves in the flow of God's love for the world.

To do so in practice requires the consideration of three aspects of mission –

content, context and contact.

content of mission – 'For God so loved the world'

There is much debate today about what constitutes mission. Is mission merely another word for evangelism - or does it include evangelism while also encompassing other aspects of Christian witness? Any answer to that question requires us to consider the full record of Scripture to glean all the ways in which God expresses his love for the world. The revelation of God's love in the giving of his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins is the core truth of our Christian faith, nevertheless one cannot read the gospels and ignore the fact that the ministry of Jesus also encompassed the demonstration of God's love for the marginalised, the weak, the poor and the sick in a multitude of ways.

It is not the purpose of the congregational mission planning process to provide a full blown theology of mission, however, by engagement with Scripture throughout we do want to call the Church back to a consideration of what it means to live up to our belief that both 'faith and practice' be guided by the standards of God's Word. As we consider the Bible's story of mission to the world, let us do so with an open mind as to what it means to fully express God's love for the world in practice in this generation.

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context for mission – 'he gave his one and only Son'

The wonder of the incarnation is that God came and lived among us as one of us in the person of his eternal Son. One contemporary writer, paraphrasing John chapter one, verse fourteen,

describes Christ's coming as follows, 'The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood'.

In calling congregations to reflect on the story of their life and witness and the story of their local area, we are asking them to take another look at who they are and what they need to become to be effective in mission. This is an exercise in seeking to understand the context of the place in which God has put us to serve and then to find ways of bearing a faithful and genuinely incarnational witness to him. Like the Triune God we need to be willing to 'give of ourselves' to serve his missional purpose.

In the rapidly changing world in which we are living it is right that we often revisit the question of how best we position ourselves to bear witness to Christ as we seek to 'come in his name' today.

contact

for mission – 'whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life'

Mission is an interpersonal enterprise whether undertaken in word or deed. Without contact with people we can have no impact in mission.

In the past most local congregations enjoyed the luxury of a place at the centre of the communities in which they were set. The atmosphere of society was friendly towards the Church, as both the shaper of moral values and for the part it played as a hub of local activity. Often this is no longer the case. We find ourselves increasingly pushed towards the margins of both society and community.

One of the greatest deficits we need to overcome is the loss of connection between Church and community. We need to be proactive in finding ways of befriending those outside of our congregations. They are not coming to us and we must rediscover the priority of going to them. Many of these people hold beliefs and pursue lifestyles very different from ours.

God's love is as expansive as the world. His offer of eternal life is as inclusive as 'whoever believes' in Christ. This truth calls us to leave the comfort zones of association with people who are just like us, to reach out in mission to those whom, otherwise, we might not naturally relate.

As congregations, this process asks that we set ourselves to identify the story of what God is calling us to do, to reconnect in mission, and to plan for our part in the future he is unfolding.

"Re-storying" the Church for Mission

Everybody loves a good story. Whether we're telling them, watching them, listening to or reading them, stories make up a significant part of our lives. Equally, we find our lives taken up into bigger stories, of events happening around us.

At the heart of the Bible is the story of God's mission – the expression of His love that reaches down into the world in Christ and through His body the Church. God calls us to play our part in His continuing story of mission today. But we can only do so as we come to understand what mission is and as it then becomes a vital part of the life of our congregation. In turn, mission transforms individual lives and entire communities, through our living witness as God's people.

The process of congregational mission planning is an invitation to explore the story of what God is doing and how He is calling us to play our part in His work now and in the future. It aims to help us find freshly appropriate ways of 'telling again' the great story of the gospel.

As we seek to discern what God is calling us to do as a congregation in mission, our understanding is shaped by the answers to five key questions:

Why?

The Bible's story of God's mission to the world

Who?

The story of our congregation's life and witness

Where?

The story of our local area

What?

The story of what God is calling us to do

When?

The unfolding of the story God is calling us to be part of in the future

Each question arises from the context of a story drawn from the Bible, our congregation, its locality, and the future potential for mission. God is the author of all these stories. As we tell each tale afresh we 're-story' the reality of who we are, and who God calls us to be, as His people. In that 're-storying' we open ourselves to the possibility of seeing the mission of God restored in the life of our Church. As all five stories converge into one, God reveals His will for our congregation and His ways for us in future mission.

“Pre-prayering” for Mission

Prayer is sometimes described as the way by which we come to 'blend our will with God's will, rather than bend His will to our will.' This is a helpful picture of how we need to approach the process of planning for mission in our congregations. We seek to bow before God's sovereign will for us as His people, recognising that our chief end is to find ways to 'glorify and enjoy Him forever.'

Through the AWAKE initiative, the Board of Mission in Ireland has provided materials for Church-wide prayer for mission to accompany the process of congregational mission planning. We encourage congregations to continue in that spirit of prayerful dependence and expectancy that God will lead and guide them in His ways for them in mission. Rather than seeking to hit the ground running, by 'pre-prayering for mission' we hit the ground kneeling!

As has been remarked,

“When we depend upon organisations, we get what organisations can do; when we depend upon education we get what education can do; when we depend on man, we get what man can do; but when we depend upon prayer, we get what God can do.”

Presbytery Mission Plans - your part in a bigger picture

Throughout 2008/2009 each Presbytery of our Church has been reflecting on the present challenges and future opportunities in their region of Ireland. As you devise your Congregational Mission Plan, begin by referring to your Presbytery's Mission Plan, a copy of which can be obtained from your Presbytery Clerk. Look for specific references to your congregation. Consider anything the Presbytery plan highlights which seems relevant to your situation. Note any recommendations. Are there examples of models of mission that other congregations have adopted that might be adaptable to your situation?

The World is our parish - mission in wider perspective

Like charity, mission begins at home, but it does not end there. While the congregational mission plan process focuses mainly on local mission it also seeks to recognise that we live in an increasingly mobile society in which networks as well as neighbourhoods provide the contexts for engagement with the world around us. Members of your congregation may be involved in all sorts of mission projects beyond your parish bounds.

Also, in the global village in which we find ourselves, many congregations are involved in significant initiatives in mission overseas. Do take the opportunity to include initiatives in mission that your congregation is involved in either nationally or internationally.

Something else altogether...

It may be that your congregation has engaged in one of the many processes of church consultation now offered by a range of organisations. You may feel that to embark on another similar process will not prove productive. If so, please feel free to adapt the missional outcomes of the process you have completed to fit the writing of a congregational mission plan as outlined in the 'Writing your Congregational Mission Plan' section.

Do be aware, however, that in planning for mission we are seeking to address issues that will make us more effective in our engagement with those presently outside the church. Matters concerning other areas of congregational life such as worship, fellowship, discipleship and ministry, while not unrelated to mission, should not form the substance of your plan.

Forming a Mission Plan Working Group

Whatever approach to congregational mission planning you decide to adopt there will be a need for planning and co-ordination. This will require the formation of a Mission Plan Working Group. We suggest a group of six to eight people, drawn from across the congregation. These may include the Minister, other staff, members of Kirk Session, those involved in the congregation's engagement with the community through existing organisations and outreaches, and other members with evident gifts of vision and planning.

The working group will need to be given responsibility to manage the planning process and recording feedback at each stage, while also maintaining accountability to Kirk Session and communication with the congregation through regular updates of the work.

A Story for our Times

There is a certain comfort and pleasure in recalling the old stories from which our shared identities as people and communities have been formed in Church and society. The challenge as we plan for congregational mission today, however, is not to seek refuge in the past. It is to continue to draw out the ageless themes of the story of the Bible in ways which are seen to make sense of the age in which we find ourselves living.

This is hard work demanding much searching of heart, scratching of head and dirtying of hands - but the fruit will be a demonstration that the Church continues to be the bearer of a gospel which is 'a story for our times'. This 're-storying' of the Church and its message is what we pray and plan for as we seek God's leading and guiding in our efforts to be his witness in this generation.

Writing your Congregational Mission Plan

As you work through the material which follows you will gather the necessary information to write your final congregational mission plan. Referring back to the 'Focused Responses' recorded at each stage of the process will help you shape the plan into final form as outlined below. If you choose to use 'Discovery' or to reconfigure the missional outworking of a previously undertaken process, the following outline still provides a useful template to bear in mind as you approach the task of compiling a final plan.

Why?

The Bible's story of God's mission to the world

Record a short statement of what you consider the congregation has learned about mission by re-engaging with the

story of God's mission to the world. This should be a realistic assessment of where the congregation is, in terms of an understanding of the importance of mission in the life of the Church, as well as their willingness to be involved in it.

Who?

The story of our congregation's life and witness

Include the summary statement composed under the 'Focused Response' section while working through this stage

of the process. Add any other comments concerning the congregation's understanding of its strengths and weaknesses resulting from working through the subsequent stages of the mission planning process.

Where?

The story of our local area

Include the summary statement composed under the 'Focused Response' section while working through this

stage of the process. Add any other comments concerning the congregation's understanding of community issues resulting from working through the subsequent stages of the mission planning process. Remember to reflect wider opportunities for involvement in mission.

What?

The story of what God is calling us to do

Include the summary statement composed under the 'Focused Response' section while working through this stage of the process.

When?

The unfolding of the story God is calling us to be part of in the future

Include the timeline you have chosen to work towards and use for ongoing assessment and evaluation.