

Current Thoughts

from Dwight's corner

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Twenty-five years ago I made public my intent to leave the university and to enter seminary in response to God's call. My sense of call had been growing over several years, and I had finally resolved in my own mind that the call was to do mission work. While seminary was technically not necessary for such an appointment, it was necessary to me as part of my own sense of preparation. (I also came to believe it was one of the ways God was working in my life without my knowing it.)

My church licensed me as an affirmation in sending me to seminary. There were both public and private examinations as part of that process. There were many questions, but one has come back to haunt me. There was a question about the church, my sense of call and why I thought I could do ministry. I covered lots of territory in my answer, but the one part of the answer that makes me shudder was: "I understand the church better now than I ever have before."

After twenty-five years I must confess that I know more now than I did then. But beyond that, I know more that I don't know. It would be easy (perhaps kind) to dismiss my answer as youthful arrogance. After all, I had been a youth leader, choir member, deacon, Sunday School teacher then Director, Church Training leader then Director, etc., etc. While I may not have had all the theology down, my first-hand experience had gotten me to the point that I could say with some confidence, truthfulness and credibility that I did understand church. The problem was that I understood church only from a functional perspective (the way we were organized, the programs we did, the events we created, etc.). Further, I understood church from only one functional perspective: an outreach-oriented church built around Sunday School. It never occurred to me that there could be other legitimate ways of doing church. More importantly, I had never even considered the question of what it means to be church.

From a functional perspective, the list of church types is long and growing. There are worship-oriented, activist, care-giving, humanitarian, missions, counter-cultural, evangelistic, seeker-sensitive, missional, practicing, and emerging churches. All are mixtures of truth and falsehood. Any could be the calling of God for a particular time and place. All are prone to the self-righteous arrogance that they are the only true way to do church. None adequately addresses the complete scope of mission and ministry by the church. Any could fall prey to misplaced (even if well-intended) priorities.

Obviously, such a hodge-podge of functional church types has serious implications for ministerial training and for denominational work (but that is for another time and place).

In my opinion, most of the approaches to church mission and ministry proposed in books, articles, conferences, workshops, etc., tend to get reduced to the functional components (whether intended or not). We act as if a church can "choose" its primary function (worship-oriented, activist, care-giving, humanitarian, missions, counter-cultural, evangelistic, seeker-

sensitive, missional, practicing, or emerging). The renewal “program” then consists of consolidating resources, creating action plans, even re-organizing and re-staffing to actually accomplish the chosen function.

I will not dismiss any of these; they are good habits to develop. However, I am not sure any church is free to “choose” its function. Instead, churches should discern what God is calling them to be first and foremost. Functions (program, events, staff) flow from and are shaped by that call. Unfortunately, God’s call may not coincide with our preconceived notions or personal preferences! (After all, I was pretty sure I had a call to medical missions.)

All the attention given to functions—to the things we do—causes us to miss the “be” question. Who is God calling us to be as persons and as churches? I have come to understand that God’s primary call to me is to be a living disciple. The call to do medical missions, pastoral leadership, or denominational work is secondary to that “being” call.

This is also true for churches. I am convinced that God has called all churches to be spiritual communities built around faith in Jesus Christ. The key to faithful mission and ministry is discerning and responding to God’s call for this spiritual community in this particular time in this particular place.

While the call to “be” is unchanging, the things we are called to “do” as a result of our being can (and should) change as circumstances change. Yet it is the doing that captures all our attention. Churches consume months in reorganization wrangles. Churches are paralyzed by financial circumstances. Churches are internally divided over doing the things that attract new members, or doing the things that bring justice, or doing the things that care for people.

It is essential to define our mission and ministry in spiritual rather than purely functional ways. Church is not about programs, services, and events. We can never be satisfied with busyness (even with good activities). Those things we do (and they are necessary) flow from the essential spiritual being of the church. Discernment about who we are and what we do is fundamentally a spiritual process. Over time, both individuals and churches forget who they are. We also become oblivious to the fact that God’s call may change, and we have not heard because we have not been listening!

Abide in me, and I will abide in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

John 15:4



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