

Session 2 FOCUS

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You, nor your congregation, want to let go of anything you do or any expectations you have. This is a serious problem!

Your congregation needs a revolutionary, everything changes, *new day*. You desperately need something like a reboot of a computer. A fresh start. A return to the first purpose. A do-over. You need a Sabbath (a stop and a focus on God)! You need Jubilee (a return to God with particular focus on ownership and management)! Like Lazarus, dead in the grave, you need to hear and experience the living God of creation and redemption!

New and different people in your congregation, and that is a certain number/percentage to create a different momentum both in the church and the community, are what you most need. Those folk will change the dynamics of a congregation. Yet this is also what you most fear. Instead of merely advertising and opening the doors of the building a time or two each week expecting folk to join you what might happen if you employ a *new approach*? What if you bent everything in the calendar, and funding, and activities of the church to show the love of God to your community? What would it look like for the individuals of a church to come to life with a focus and energy that results from a transformation from God that locals might say, "You're not going to believe this, but need to see it for yourself!"

Our mission team walked into the simple building, you might call it a skeleton of a building it was so minimal, and found it was about as bare bones basic as you can imagine. It offered a place to meet, some protection from the weather, and a sense of identity and location. But it didn't define the people who met there as they have great dreams of reaching their community that eclipses their temporary meeting place. They are active reaching out to their community saving lives, going to extremes beyond their resources to reach children and youth, and investing their concentrated church energy in a shared belief and action of what it means to be such a church in their community.

As I write this I'm thinking about specific, diverse congregations in El Salvador, in Kenya, in the Philippines, and in the United States! A Missio Dei church can happen anywhere. The focus is upon being the Body of Christ. The orientation is toward the future. The focus of mission and ministry is centered in the community through the people of faith and not stuck in a building. A Lazarus Church can be a reality in your congregation and community, but it calls for a different approach and perspective than many established congregations exhibit.

Such a church has, and maintains, a sharp focus which doesn't get lost with the varied personalities or in all the activities of a congregation. Everything can't be a priority! What are the essentials of a congregation in missio Dei? Though rooted in Church tradition the priorities aren't lost in the storm of congregational expectations and practices. They have a vibrant identity and practice as the living Body of Christ which doesn't create traps of history, or a building, or even strong personalities. Of necessity

priorities will preclude some activities, so they are most comfortable in their skin as a church. This doesn't mean that elements of focus won't change over time. This is more like a living body that lives through the challenges and opportunities of different "ages and stages" of life. Give any congregation 10 years or more, imagine the shifting generations and demographics, and the Good News will adjust in order to be *incarnational ministry* in that place. The key, as we might recall from Lazarus Church, is hearing God's call today and our responding to abundant life beyond the grave. Some of the power of this approach is the connection to the life in the larger community.

But we people do get *confused* along the way. What is true for an individual is even more true of a group. In short order most congregations put all their emphasis on one hour of one day, upon a physical location and building, and upon certain activities, style, and substance; a church lapses into a socially acceptable status quo. It doesn't take long for us to stack stones (recall the Old Testament practice of marking where a holy event had occurred?) and create practices (want to list everything your church does?) which we continue as a way of reliving what has happened with God (like Camp Meeting, or revival, or camp, or 20 years in Disciple Bible Study, etc). We become less a *grassroots movement* and more about *consumer ritual*. What about the *next steps of faith* as a congregation following Christ? What about key relationships and practices with new and different people from your community? What religious practices have somehow become *idols* despite our best intentions?

For individuals or groups that enjoy history a study of **early Methodism** can be useful at this point. I've been enjoying "American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists" by John Wigger. Early Methodists in the United States always had a strong sense of sharing the full gospel of Jesus Christ, especially in outreach, and with this mission always being where the people were even on the extreme edges of the frontier. The gospel mandate was to go to the people!

Scripture: Skim the Bible and think about the people of faith over the ages, how they lost or kept their focus, and the interplay between the redemptive drama and human tendency to lose focus. Reflect on how often the Bible "heroes" charted a new course during a time of challenge and change. Consider Noah, Moses, David, Peter, Saul/Paul, & others.

If you are doing this as a group study divide into **sub-groups** of 3 people (adjust accordingly for your group size though the emphasis is on small group discussion) and take 5-10 minutes to discuss the FOCUS that you find in your assigned scripture. **Group 1:** Luke 4:18-19/ Isaiah 61, **Group 2:** John 14:12, **Group 3:** 2 Corinthians 5 and **Group 4:** I Corinthians 12.

What is the focus you find in the passage? What can your church learn & enact from this focus?

In contrast to the Pharisees and other religious of his day, Jesus offers a focus upon the **kingdom of God** and expresses that in everyday, practical ways which change everything. This is both a spoken about and lived out reality. Recall your favorite stories of the ministry of Jesus. Notice the **comprehensive range** of the ministry of Jesus including preaching, teaching, praying, healing, miracles, etc. What does this mean for the church today? What is your congregation missing in following Jesus as you consider the whole range of his ministry?

You may focus most specifically on the **Lord's Prayer** and the phrase "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven..." What are the implications for your congregation each day in the *missio Dei* as you pray, preach, teach, and practice this? How are you doing this?

What is your *congregation missing* in your following of Christ that your community most needs?

Open your **hymnal** and think about the work of your congregation as you recall the wording in our communion liturgy with particular focus on what Jesus was anointed to do, the covenant with the Church, and then the phrases about “in union with Christ’s offering” and “that we may be for the world the body of Christ redeemed by his blood.”

Many congregations have become many, many things over the years. Rather than go through all of that history and rationalizing let’s focus on the *future*. The intent isn’t to nitpick, criticize, or create guilt. Instead, let’s dream with God and consider the priorities. Let’s hear the voice of God today for who our congregation is to be as the *Body of Christ*. This has profound personal and corporate implications as the team pulls together.

The UMC Book of Discipline says, “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” (BOD para. 120). Our emphasis in all we do as a congregation must be on making disciples. See paragraph 122 and discuss this process, how your congregation is doing, and where you are hearing God’s voice as a Lazarus Church. Now, pull out the calendar and church budget and community news and answer this question again.

The key in all of this will be to get very specific for your congregation and community. Do not go down the path of generalities, superficial cosmetics, and whitewashing a gravestone. What can you truly focus on that is most important to living out the Lord’s Prayer? A Lazarus Church will hear with clarity The Voice cutting through death and darkness- even through all the clutter and activity of our congregation- and bringing life. What fresh focus do you find in worship, discipleship, and outreach as you hear God?

Missio Dei Practice: Review a week in the life of your congregation. How are you creating disciples in everything that your church does? How is this happening in the community?

Video Option: 10:30 minute - “The Movement: Part 2” empowering a sustainable movement, relational 50/50 long term partnership, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-uaj08V7f9o&list=PLLndq_wxshzEFGVwtdCXt3jJu8ePxRIOh&index=50