

Session 4 URGENCY

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Here's a **scale of urgency**:

Urgent like the last two minutes of the championship football game and your team is behind by 5 points and you are at first and goal.

Urgent like in the emergency room and you are the patient with what you suspect is a heart attack.

Urgent like on the battlefield and your unit is under attack and must work together in order to live.

Urgent like the 10:58 Sunday morning and someone seems to have hidden the bulletins, the acolyte hasn't lit the candles, you notice your district superintendent in the crowd, and in the last minute rush you aren't sure where you've put your Bible and sermon outline.

Often in the church we seem to prioritize many, many things. Of course, not everything is urgent. What is truly urgent for your church? What is truly urgent for your community? Now compare notes.

So far we've considered what it means to be a Lazarus Church in the *missio Dei* and examined the focus and context of a congregation. With a strong sense that *our time is quickly running out* we now add the sense of urgency that accompanies the congregation active in the Kingdom of God. Our sense in this is that we are about life and death issues, that what we do has eternal consequence and importance, and that church "business as usual" is no longer an option! Our response to God, and our activity in our community in the *missio Dei* will have transformational consequence for both those we serve and for the congregation. Our urgency is that we are like a person who has escaped death, been given new life, and now have a second change with purpose and focus.

Closed System Church?: There is a great danger at this point that none of this makes sense, that this is merely another Bible study, and that there are no practical applications of holy living embraced by individuals or congregation. This is extremely challenging as it *calls everyone to change!* It's one thing for a pastor to speak of an "open table" at communion, but entirely another for a congregation to open up its doors to the community. Truthfully, we all like to be around folk like us- people with the same values, same expectations, same language and culture, same sense of recreation and vacation. This is why the attractional model of church has been a norm for many congregations. We need a new church norm that reclaims an old way of being the church that has every member, and the congregational ministries, with an everyday focus of engaging the world for Christ.

Give such any congregation just a few years, and fail to consistently add many new folk to the mix, and what do you get? The shared time, and experiences, language, and common expectations can create a *closed system group* even with a crowd with the best theology and best of intentions (this is why it is easier to start new Sunday School classes and new churches to engage new people). An open system interacts with the larger environment and there is a sustainability and sufficient flow between a

group and the larger community; a closed system is a static group, set in its ways and course, and therefore on a lifecycle which will end unless there is an openness to the larger community. This is rather similar to my attempts at gardening each year. My little ecological system needs sufficient input, work, management, and attention consistently in order to produce what we desire. Inattention, or too little or too much of any of those inputs, always has consequences!

Some of the urgency may be driven by the *needs* of people in our community. Or is it the needs of the Christian or church? I guess the answer is “yes” to both. It could be that the Lazarus Church is sick, dying, or dead as a closed system. What happens if your church doesn’t break out of the grave? What happens if you continue the path you are on at this point in the life cycle of your church? Does your congregation do illness or death gracefully? Or is there an action of God that changes all of you so that there is a resurrection?

State of our community: I once served as a family preservation therapist in Lexington County, South Carolina with families in crisis. My group would be the last option prior to the state removing a child or teen from the home. The home of the family in crisis, and my car, served as my office. It was a 24/7 job and I covered the entire county ranging from urban to suburban to middle class and upper class families and neighborhoods. The urgency of the situation had to be met by equally aggressive availability and response in order to create new habits and develop a new way forward in life.

Every community has a host of issues. This can differ from one neighborhood to another, but it is there. Every individual and every family has challenges and opportunities in life. The poorest of neighborhoods, and the richest of communities, has the ravages of sin, the opportunities and challenges of following Jesus, and the kingdom of God at work in varied people and situations. People’s lives are wrecked every day- sometimes by their own hand and sometimes by others- so how are we part of a redemptive effort through the church as we partner with God to save lives? Do we hear the cry of the people and hear that as a follower of Christ and as a Church?

How does your *church become an everyday partner* with the kingdom of God? Do you- as Methodist Christians and as Methodist Church- know community people outside the Church well enough that they invite you into their lives? Push deeper into the specifics of your community and the particular needs related to sin and grace in your neighborhood. Don’t do this in judgmental ways, but try to follow the way of Jesus in this and consider the prayers of the people of the land, the opportunity to heal and bless others, and the everydayness of life that yearns for the Kingdom and will of God to be made real in your neighborhood. What are the church next steps in this ongoing experiment to love God and to love your neighbor as yourselves?

Scripture and State of the Congregation: Reality check! Note this will not be easy. Consider the “woes” in Luke & early Revelation & letters of Paul= Matthew 23, Rev 3:14-20, etc. Or delve into Daniel 5:27, Isaiah 1:16-17, or the sheep and goats of Matthew 25: 31-46. Consider religion that leads nowhere, or worse, causes harm. We must admit that we, our church, our religion, can often get it wrong, fail to live up to our high calling, and do more harm than good. Such honest assessment and repentance is healthy for us, and communities will appreciate our vulnerability, our humanity, our recognition of our sin and earnest seeking of a better way that leads to *abundant life*. This can be, and should be, an ongoing matter of assessment, prayer, and confession (baptismal and communion liturgies as useful at this point).

For positive verses we can examine a *call to an immediate action* which is often uttered by Jesus in the Gospels: Matthew 3:2 “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” Paul is often as emphatic with the church with 2 Corinthians 6:1-2 as one example among many: “As God’s co-workers we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain. For he says, ‘In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you. ‘I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation.” Matthew 9: 35-38 highlight this: “Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.’” These are the examples we are called to follow as individuals and as part of the church movement.

Dig deeper into the practical needs of your community that demand your sense of urgency: the orphans, widows, prisoners, and enemies in your community, all who are fighting for their lives, those praying for hope and purpose, all who have no one on their side, many looking for second chances, the legion of people battling addictions, the scores of other demons that plague the land, & others who come to mind. Create a list, and the opportunities, which fit your community.

As a Lazarus Church what will you do with your short life, and your new lease on life, that will help others into life? As a Lazarus Church how will you help the congregation live as the Body of Christ in the community? As a Lazarus Church how will you help others become part of the urgent life-saving, life-giving, life-empowering ministry?

Missio Dei practice: What is waking you up at night or troubling your soul so that you are compelled to respond? Who or what is your prayer life, Bible study, and everyday life revealing as priorities?

Video Option: Both of these are “lighter” in content and thus paired up with this session to reinforce the mission of God. I don’t endorse this group, but I like the one minute impact of calling YOU to missio Dei. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mk5ImOEccJE>

Even better, though again sharing a video to provoke thought and discussion and not endorsing this church, check out the 2 1.2 minute video offering more theological language at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZfZfUWLil88>