



## Introduction: Your Church Needs to Die to Itself

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Welcome to a 5-6 session discovery of the **mission of God in your context**. This introduction is necessary (and might be used as a first session at the church) as we embark on a different approach to mission and Bible study than you may have experienced in the past. This original study is intended to supplement your use of a Bible study and commentary and provide a practical theological exploration of your church and community. Find here some *key concepts of mission* to apply and put into practice. Further, we offer tools to assist a congregation in a new call to life as we offer a radical shift from the current congregational approach to the priorities of becoming a mission and disciple movement. The potential in this is to create a positive congregational momentum as a church experiences a new birth of mission and ministry with God.

Note that the intent of this study is to push a local church, especially clergy and laity, well beyond the normal comfort zone and approaches of their past. Be warned; we are actively **inviting and engaging change!** If there is a true openness to God, an eagerness to be a community of faith for a community, and these practices are engaged in deeply, it is likely that the church will experience incredible new adventures in following the way of Christ and being empowered by Holy Spirit. Of course, there may be clergy, or church staff, or church leaders who will prefer tradition and their managed programs to such a dynamic environment. The opportunity is to get into study, prayer, discussion, and practice the most important issues of church and community, and in that place of challenge to experience the living God who offers resurrection and new life.

Perhaps a brief *introduction* is in order. I've served as clergy in a variety of congregations (in size and location) for 25 years and typically led ministry in areas of discipleship, mission, and general church programming as part of my work. My experience in mission is deeply rooted in a mix of local, national, and international mission (the ongoing experiment to love God and love neighbor from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth in long term relationships in over a dozen countries). This has always been firmly within the context of a church based mission and ministry. So, I've typically had more of a present and future church orientation as I've looked for strong community involvement with an eye for what God is

doing and what people are seeking. This is the intersection of church development (spiritual formation and discipleship) and outreach (mission and evangelism). It's from this background, which now extends to hundreds of churches in my current role of assisting the churches within an annual conference, that I share this study and encourage your experimentation in creating a vital congregation for tomorrow.

In our changing times **many congregations are stuck** in a certain programmatic routine and approach. You may find your church experience lacks vitality and there is a general apathy and acceptance of the status quo. You may sense some divine possibilities yet finding it a challenge to connect with your own neighborhood and town in deep, authentic ways. It may be that what has been a hallway or parking lot conversation has never found its way into a more formal, prayerful discussion. How can you bridge what may seem a Grand Canyon divide between hope and reality, between church and community?

Find within this short study an introduction into *missiological perspectives* which will help a congregation more deeply experience scriptural faith and how to live that out in community. The international church has much to teach us in this area and some of their insight will be shared. This orientation calls upon individuals and groups to listen closely to each other and to God, therefore is geared toward reflection, conversation, and application. Think of it as an international mission trip with a group in your own community. Imagine your church finding its place in the dynamic mission of God today.

Of course, there are many *challenges* to this that can stop us before we even begin. Yet we shouldn't quickly discount culture or context or economics as if those disqualify learning from the larger Church. We doom ourselves before we start if we say God can't and we can't. In fact, it is most likely God will awaken us to new realities in our communities if we dare follow Christ in these fresh ways. It is imperative that each congregation learn from the larger Church and awaken to the kingdom of God alive in our community (think and pray about prevenient grace in your neighborhood and know God is still at work).

Many of our congregations seem too *comfortable*, too aligned with status quo, too set in style and substance because that is what we know and prefer. We have gotten locked into our preferred routines, repetitions, and realities that maintain the chaplaincy expectations of current church members, yet which don't adequately engage the larger world. We stick to our program, stay with the calendar, continue our old debates, and keep the ship on course so that we minimize upset within the current club. We continue a routine of the last decade, or longer, that helps us maintain tradition yet which doesn't seem to engage the church or the community in the present kingdom of God. Too often the Good News becomes stale news as we are missing new and different people, stop engaging new relationships, and keep everyone we've got happy without substantially connecting with the larger mass of humanity just beyond the doors of the church. In doing so we become further removed from our community, an odd, isolated, dying club, out of step with our larger community relationships and possibilities of being a church of tomorrow. It is this unexamined church life which we must intentionally place before God.

Every UMC congregation needs to discover a *new day* in the mission of God in our own community. The "last chapter" of many U.S. churches began to define programming as the key to church life and health. We began producing consumers more than church participants or followers of Jesus.

Worship attendance became a key indicator rather than disciple production. We became a respected institution rather than a movement of disciples. In many communities in the United States the church is now in decline as one generation ages and dies and the next generation claims a path of being spiritual yet not religious. The last chapter must now give way to a new day and new approaches for the church.

I share this with a sense of *ownership* and eagerness to keep growing in Christ. I helped write the “last” chapter of church and mission as I’ve served congregations the last 25 years. I followed what was modeled, accepted the approaches, and sought to offer the best of what I knew in congregations over that time. Today as I visit many churches in the US, and as I experience the church movement around the world, I’m drawn back to scripture and our historic Methodist approaches. I’ve become aware that I’m often more captivated by my cultural Christianity and experience than I realized. The good of this tension is God is awakening me to Scripture and faith, the needs in community, and the historic *missio Dei* which is asking for our participation today. Perhaps this is also your experience.

It is an exciting time to serve church and Church as we write the *better next chapter* of following Christ in our communities today. Yet we must give up many of our easy preferences and learn some new habits. We must die to ourselves, our old practices, and our beloved traditions. We must become a Lazarus Church!

New and different people in your congregation, and that is a certain number to create a different *momentum* both in church and community, are what we most need. Those folk will change the dynamics of the congregation in helpful ways. Yet this is also what we most *fear* as we yield to God and to our neighbor. Instead of expecting folk to show up at the church (the old attractional model of worship and church “belonging”) we must now match our approach to meet the needs of our neighbors. This creates an exciting environment of everyday Christianity and of church which helps us beyond our current church illness or death spiral.

Find within this resource pack a variety of tools to assist you. In many regards this is a general tool intended to be *adjusted for your context*. Note the planning guide as a helpful resource which may be used as part of the introduction. It may be that you will be meeting in different locations for the sessions (see planning guide), so inform your group about this in the initial meeting. Further, it is worth discussing group dynamics and process, appropriate communication, and how this process can be formative to engaging the material and being open to a new day in the life of a congregation. You will also find worship and prayer helps as this can easily become an “*all church*” *study and sermon series*.

If you use this introduction as a *first meeting* you might want to spend time with folk getting to know each other in deeper ways including sharing how they came to faith and what their church experience is. Discuss with the group the “last chapter” of the church and what a fresh, new next chapter might be. Is the church “stuck” in any ways that you can name? What are your personal dreams of the church? How do you personally respond to the Christian idea of “dying to self?” How do you react to that when you think of a team or group “dying to self?” For an assignment to prepare for Session 1 have everyone **read John 1:11-44**. You could print out session 1 if they wish to read the whole session prior to the meeting or adapt a handout that best fits your group style and approach.

Do not hesitate to reach out to Rev. Scott Parrish and others in the Connectional Ministries group as we encourage you and assist you as part of your larger team.

It is noteworthy that for a church vitally engaged in the mission of God a congregation will have a sharp focus, a dynamic relationship to their context, a sense of urgency, and a broad involvement in a grassroots movement that is a continuation of the apostolic ministry. These are the elements of the Lazarus Church addressed in the sessions.

- Planning (as with many things you may want to read the “planning” and “postscript” first)
- Worship and Application (sermon ideas)
- Intro (this session)
- Session 1- Lazarus Church & MISSIO DEI
- Session 2- FOCUS
- Session 3- CONTEXT
- Session 4- URGENCY
- Session 5- MOVEMENT
- Post Script