

## Session 1 MISSIO DEI

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These are definitive days for your congregation which will determine whether your church will be alive in a few years. Yet many churches are continuing what they've done for years as if nothing has changed.

There are significant differences between a congregation that has lost *momentum* and a church that has a vitality which seems to be like the playground of God. Every church offers worship and music and prayers and some level of mission and ministry. Sometimes we mistake activity for vitality. Perhaps we think maintaining what we have done in the past is the standard of knowing how we're doing. Too often we seem tied more to the past than the present. Most congregations never seriously undertake an assessment or evaluation of how things are going. Yet across the land we have an epidemic, a plague, of churches either stalled, dying, or dead.

Can we accept the reality of our congregation, the *honest assessment* of what is happening, or do we continue "business as usual" no matter what anyone tells us? If we dare hear the truth of our condition will we, as individuals and collectively as a group, follow the necessary changes that may offer life and a new day? Can this be the time of our greatest opportunity to serve God faithfully?

To consider the health of our congregation we could choose scripture from any number of locations in the Gospels, the epistles, Revelation, and more. For this exercise read **John 11:1-44** and a section of the **Lazarus** story as the imagery is so helpful to this topic.

Recall the scene in John 11 where Lazarus declines from illness to death, and how Jesus uses that as an opportunity to perform a miracle and bring life to the dead. This scene stands out in John as it both foreshadows what was to come in the life of Jesus and stands as a model for believers of all times as to how God works in the world. This active bringing to life is the Easter story which may continue to live out today. This can be understood as more than individual as it may also be a *corporate reality*.

What if we consider this *redemptive possibility* for our congregation? Follow the Lazarus story of sickness, dying, and death and think about your church. Think about the years of the congregation, the good times and bad, and allow yourself to reflect upon the church as it is today. Maybe you are a healthy group in the most vibrant years. Maybe your congregation is obviously in transition or decline. No matter your sense of health consider the span of life and dig deeper again into this passage.

"Lord, the one you love is sick." Don't scapegoat one person or issue, but consider the whole. Feel that contrast between God's love and the reality of your situation. Where is your congregation sick? How is it sick? Consider this from different perspectives: long term member, new member, Church official, and visitor/s from community. What do they see? What do they say?

Think about Mary and Martha: Who have you got on your side that most deeply cares about the health of the congregation and is a key advocate/pray-er/encourager? Who is concerned about you?

“... has fallen asleep.” Is your church asleep or dead? Are you asleep or dead? How do you know?

What would it take for a *miracle* of God to take place in your congregation? What would it take for your church to be a Lazarus Church (both a church brought to new life by God and a place where people are brought to new life)? How might the glory of God shine if your congregation experienced resurrection? What would resurrection in your church look like? What will your congregation do with this new life? How does your role change from the church that has been to the church that will be?

The **missio Dei** (Pronounce it “miss e o day.” See <http://www.umcmission.org/Learn-About-Us/About-Global-Ministries/Theology-of-Mission> to dig deeper into the mission of God) is alive and well, yet many congregations are stuck in a certain way of thinking and acting which shortchanges our true calling. We talk about this present kingdom of God in sermon and studies though we can find it a challenge to live that out. What is the church experience of missio Dei? How do we engage every church member in both an outreach program and lifestyle that helps them & many others to follow Christ in the kingdom of God?

Methodist congregations in Asia and Africa and Latin America offer guidance in this as many are serving effectively in very tough locations and reaching people in their community in dynamic ways. This can often be surprising as on the surface so much seems to be against the church. Such churches emphasize the future and not the past, as they see possibilities and the work of God, despite what might be seen as limitations of resources and challenges of situations. Note that it isn’t necessary for a movement to be a majority action. In fact, think of the Church around the world, of Francis Asbury with the early circuit riders, of John Wesley with a laity and clergy, and of Jesus with a handful of close followers.

Some *characteristics* of Methodist Christian individuals and their churches with strategic ministries include:

- \*Dependence upon God and obedience in practice of faith
- \*Hopeful message of God’s grace, in word and deed, available to all people
- \*Vivacious/Enlivening ministries for the community through the Body of Christ
- \*Exhibit Great risk in mission and ministry- no holding back- total commitment- with practical expressions of the love/mercy/kindness of God in Christ
- \*Consistent focus of loving God & loving neighbor like Jesus has shown.

In too many of our churches we have substituted redundancy over relevance, style over substance, programs rather than discipleship, and a group club mentality rather than being a movement of God. We are too often looking with longing backward to yesteryear instead of a forward based on reality. We have programs, approaches, and even buildings with the church of 10 or 20 or even 40 or years or more ago as the model. That’s a lot of baggage that needs to be cleaned up and cleared out for us to live into a dynamic, fresh church. How might we *die to ourselves* in order to rise to new life following Christ?

There are tried and true *principles from Scripture and faith* which are adaptable to any context. This isn’t always easy; it’s a relational dynamic with God and neighbor. All around the world the historic Methodist Christian approach speaks the language of the people and meets their holistic needs for

abundant life which follows Christ and shares Good News in word, deed, and power. The Bible often speaks of this movement of God- a different sort of kingdom, a new creation and reconciled people on a different path, a redemptive, turn everything upside down way of God. This adventure of following Christ calls us again today. There is abundant life for congregations which give themselves away to *missio Dei*.

Congregations around the world, often in locations where you wouldn't expect much (like a graveyard, dump site, or shantytown), lead the way in showing *how to follow Jesus* and serve as a church sent by God into the community. Just beyond the walls of every congregation is a community which is our context and our lifeline for the future. God is at work! Can your Lazarus Church hear the voice of the Living God and the prayers of your community? Can you hear God's call to life? As we respond to God's voice, and the cry of our community, we will find new life and purpose which gives our congregation sharp focus, fits our neighborhood well, has an incarnational urgency, and fits the apostolic ministry of sharing the Good News in word and deed. This is our opportunity if we are brave enough to respond.

A church of the poor has nothing to lose. A church in a dump has nothing to lose. A church in a graveyard can risk all. No matter our community a church who hears the living God may be resurrected for new life and mission.

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**Missio Dei Practice:** What is the most important thing that you, and your congregation, are being each day and each week that exemplifies Good News in your community?

Where is God at work in people's lives in your community? How would you know?

**Video Option:** "The Movement: Part 1" 11 minute video. Overview of global Methodist mission movement with insights for the U.S. church. Post-colonial mission, 50/50 partnering, best practices [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PAnte9fM3AY&list=PLLndq\\_wxshzEFGVwtdCXt3jJu8ePxRIOh&index=77](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PAnte9fM3AY&list=PLLndq_wxshzEFGVwtdCXt3jJu8ePxRIOh&index=77)