

Week 6: Missional Disciplines

Share your faith in surprisingly simple ways.

Michael Frost

What is “Missional”?

“Missional” is an annoyingly made-up word. You won’t find it in the Oxford English Dictionary (yet) although it has been used by Christian academics since at least the early 90’s. It is a word whose creation was necessitated by the fact that words like “mission” and “missionary” simply carry too much baggage to be helpful in describing the rather novel position in which the Church finds itself in the 21st Century Western world. In short, the word seeks to describe the way in which Christians in the post-Christian West are being challenged to relate to the world around them.

For 15 Centuries Christians in the West have enjoyed living in Christian societies where Christianity has been the dominant religion and culture. Mission, in that context, was something that happened on foreign shores and was carried out by specially trained, adventure-seekers.

Almost overnight that all changed during the 20th Century.

How do Christians now live in a society that is apathetic and even somewhat suspicious towards the Gospel? How do Christians speak about their faith in a society where faith-talk of any kind is taboo? How is mission work to happen when the mission frontier is at the church gate and every believer is suddenly a potential missionary?

The answer is that we (both individual Christians and church communities) are called to become mission-focussed and mission-shaped. But the old methods of mission don’t apply and the heroic missionaries of the past do not provide an adequate model for us to follow – hence “missional” describes a new way for us to live our faith and to embody the mission of Jesus to the world.

“Surprise the World!” – Michael Frost

A lot has been written about the missional challenge facing the Church today, but our present study is about prayer and not about the study of 21st Century Church history. So, our focus for this final session is on the types of spiritual disciplines that are of particular and urgent value to the church in our present situation.

Michael Frost calls these “The Five Habits of Highly Missional People”.

His thesis is that the Church has always had most success in gaining adherents and converts and positively influencing the society around it when it has stirred up positive curiosity in the world. He refers to Christians who live “questionable” lives, by which he means lives that pique the curiosity of outside observers. The example he cites from the Early Church is the way that ordinary believers practiced hospitality and kindness towards all and especially the poor and the sick even from among their Roman oppressors. So surprising was their influence that the 4th Century Emperor, Julian, feared they might take over the empire. Referring to Christians as “atheists” (because they did not believe in the Roman gods), he wrote as follows to his regional officials:

“We must pay special attention to this point, and by this means effect a cure. For when it came about that the poor were neglected and over-looked by the (pagan) priests, then I think the impious Galileans observed this fact and devoted themselves to philanthropy. And they have gained ascendancy in the worst of their deeds through the credit they win for such practices. For just as those who entice children with a cake, and by throwing it to them two or three times induce them to follow them, and then, when they are far away from their friends cast them on board a ship and sell them as slaves... By the same method, I say, the Galileans also begin with their so-called love feasts, or hospitality, or service tables – for they have many ways of carrying it out and hence call it by many names – and the result is that they have led very many into atheism. (Christianity).”

The solution he suggests is that the Roman officials must begin offering the same form of social care modelled by the Christians:

“Why do we not observe that it is their benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase atheism? I believe that we ought really and truly to practice every one of these virtues.... For it is disgraceful that when... The impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us.”

Frost’s point is that in our own day we should be looking for new and creative ways to surprise the world with the loving presence of Christ both within our Christian community and in our relationships with our society.

“When predictability is high, impact is low.

...Acts of philanthropy by Christians today are relatively commonplace, so they don’t surprise the world...Neither does living a fine, upstanding, middle-class lifestyle in the suburbs....If we’re trying to live questionable lives, then cutting the lawn, saying hi to the neighbours, washing our car, walking the dog, and driving to the office every day is hardly an intriguing lifestyle.

We need to become a godly, intriguing, socially adventurous, joyous presence in the lives of others. This won’t be a matter of simply doing somewhat surprising but occasional things. I believe we need to develop a new set of rhythms, or habits, that foster a missional lifestyle that intrigues others.”

Habit 1: Bless – I will bless three people this week – at least one of whom is not a member of our church.

The word “bless” can be interpreted quite widely here – to praise, to encourage, to help, to show goodwill towards. Frost suggests three ways we could bless others: By offering them words of affirmation; by performing an act of kindness for them; and by giving them a thoughtful gift. To these we may add Gary Chapman’s other two expressions of love, namely, physical touch (sometimes someone may simply need a hug) and quality time (sometimes the kindest thing we can do for another is to simply be with them).

The key to this habit is that the blessings should be entirely gratuitous. We do not bless in order to get anything in return, nor do we bless as a sneaky way to make the other person feel obliged to listen to an evangelistic message – we simply bless them. We do so with humility, gentleness and generosity, being sensitive to what they would actually experience as a blessing, and without expecting thanks or recognition.

Habit 2: Eat – I will eat with three people this week – at least one of whom is not a member of our church.

Our modern celebration of the Lord’s Supper has often become so infrequent or so stylised that it can conceal the vital and central role that shared meals played in the ministry of Jesus

and in the life of the Early Church. We can recapture some of this vitality by deliberately sharing meals with others on a regular basis. Alan Hirsch and Lance Ford put it this way:

“Sharing meals together on a regular basis is one of the most sacred practices we can engage in as believers. Missional hospitality is a tremendous opportunity to extend the kingdom of God. We can literally eat our way into the kingdom of God! If every Christian household regularly invited a stranger or a poor person into their home for a meal once a week, we would literally change the world by eating.”

Again, this habit is not a means to an end but an end in itself. It is enough just to be at table with others and if you do so without favour or judgement and with genuine attention to and interest in your host or guest, then your mere companionship (“bread-sharing” in Latin) with them will itself be a powerful missional witness.

Habit 3: Listen – I will spend at least one period of the week listening for the Spirit’s voice.

We could simply interpret this habit as the discipline of prayer and, indeed, all we have learnt so far in this course on prayer should be helpful in working out the “how” of this habit. But there is something quite specific at stake here and it may be worthwhile unpacking a bit of the theology behind the missional movement at this point.

A key element of missional thinking is the belief that before any of us engage in any sort of mission, God through Christ is already at work in the world. The work of Jesus in the world is described in theology as the “mission of God” or the “*Missio Dei*” (to give it its Latin name). The principle is as follows: Christ is at work in the world (making all things new – Rev 21:5; reconciling the world to God – 2 Cor 5:19; having all things in heaven and earth united in him – Eph 1:10; granting life in abundance – John 10:10; etc.) and we are invited to join in His mission as participants. If this is the case, then the first and most critical task of every Christian is discernment – to listen for the Spirit’s voice so that we may know what precisely Jesus is doing here and now and to discover how we can participate.

So prayer, in this case, is specifically aimed at listening rather than speaking and in particular listening with a view to discovering what we can do to aid Jesus’ mission in our immediate vicinity.

Habit 4: Learn – I will spend at least one period of the week learning Christ.

Again, we could simply interpret this as Bible study, but again there is something more specific at stake here. In line with what was just said in the previous heading, our aim here is to uncover the heart of Jesus – not simply to gain knowledge about Jesus.

Some studies Michael Frost suggests are to read the Gospels, to read a book about Jesus or to watch one of the many excellent movies about the life of Jesus.

We are being challenged here to go beyond mere creedal statements about Jesus and the Trinity, and to start thinking and speaking about Jesus energy and enthusiasm, with reverence and awe, with delight and wonder!

Habit 5: Be Sent – I will journal throughout the week all the ways I alerted others to the universal reign of God through Christ.

The point of this habit is not the journal itself, although that can be a rich blessing in itself, but the ongoing seeking for opportunities to see God’s kingdom coming in the world and to point it out to others. Please don’t misunderstand – the aim is not to become stuffy bores who reduce every conversation to a statement about God and religion. The aim is to point out signs of God’s kingdom even if those to whom we point them out don’t quite “get” that God is behind it all.

For example, we point out God’s work of reconciliation when we ourselves offer or receive forgiveness, when we step in to mediate in a dispute or misunderstanding in the workplace – even if we don’t then go on to say, “And so, you see, God is at work reconciling us”.

Similarly, we highlight God’s desire for justice when we step in on behalf of someone who has been treated unfairly, or side with a just cause or make some contribution towards the welfare of the oppressed.

Another way to draw attention to God’s work in the world is to highlight moments or scenes of beauty. This can be powerfully surprising in a world where the expectation is that people will moan and carp about the slightest fault.

And finally, we bear witness to signs of God’s kingdom whenever we assist in bringing about the wholeness or healing of another person.