

A vision for a Post-COVID-19 Church

Or

Will we return to the comfortable pew or develop the missional church?

By Roderic P. Frohman, HR

Fifty-five years ago, in the midst of a burgeoning Civil Rights Movement and when mainline Protestant pastors were being trained as program managers, a Canadian Anglican, Pierre Burton, wrote a seminal book, The Comfortable Pew.¹ Burton said,

“Institutional Christianity, in short, has become a comfortable creed, a kinder, sugarcoated pill that soothes those who fear to face traditional Christian concerns of evil, suffering and death.”²

Burton left the Canadian Anglican church punctuating his departure with a sad and ironic citation of his favorite hymn, “The Day Thou Gavest, Lord, Has Ended.” Ouch!

Twenty-two years ago, 1998, in the midst of rapidly declining numbers in mainline denominations, and the rise of the mega-church, Presbyterian Darrell Guder of Princeton Seminary wrote, Missional Church. The structures and the theology of our Western traditional churches, Guder said,

“...are shaped by the legacy of Christendom, a system of church-state partnership and cultural hegemony in which the Christian religion was the protected and privileged religion of society. Even though the legal structures of Christendom have now been removed, the legacy continues as a pattern of powerful traditions, attitudes and social structures that we describe as, ‘functional Christendom’.”³

In other words, our European cultural heritage since the 19th century has shaped church as the place where a mainly white, “Christianized” civilization has gathered comfortably before God.

The COVID-19 pandemic may be a fatal blow to this current understanding of comfortable Christendom because the pandemic has eliminated gathering comfortably, for a

¹ Berton, Pierre & Harrison, Earnest, The Comfortable Pew: A Critical Look at Christianity and the Religious Establishment, 1965, Philadelphia, JB Lippincott and Company.

² Ibid. P.82 – 83

³ Guder, Darrell, L., et al. in Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America, 1998, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, p. 6. [Guder is Professor Emeritus of Mission and Ecumenical Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey.]

while to come. But the pandemic has uncovered at least two other pandemics which now engulf church and society, for which there is no anticipated vaccine; the fragility of the American economy and the constantly denied structural racism of our society.

We all know we cannot (and should not) “go back to normal”. Regardless, we face several dangers:

- We may so desperately want to return to our buildings that we will default to whatever “normal” we can find.
- We will not use this crisis as an opportunity to stop, look, listen and measure how we crave to continue to be comfortable, Christendom congregations.
- We will be merely methodological. The danger for us is to be consumed by 24 or more techniques to sanitize our buildings to see how rapidly we can re-fit old Christendom into our buildings.
- If we don’t stop and assess now, in 20 years there will be a dozen new books written about the end of the church in our era and how we missed the opportunity to re-invent the church.

So, here is the vision for the Church which will have to deal with pandemics of racism and poverty long after a COVID-19 vaccine is discovered and administered; that is, for at least the next generation.

The church is the place from where Christians, as a body of disciples, are sent out by God in mission. The church is God’s sent people. Thus our challenge today is to move from church with mission to missional church.⁴

What are we to do?

1. Recover the New Testament missional understanding of the Church.

As the chart on the next page shows, a missional congregation is rooted in 5 New Testament functions,⁵ which are intrinsically interrelated and mutually reinforcing. They form a holistic view of how we respond to God’s call. Note the alignment of

⁴ Guder, Darrell, L., et al. in Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America, 1998, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, p. 6. Guder is Professor Emeritus of Mission and Ecumenical Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey.

⁵ The 5 New Testament functions are excerpted from: Evinger, James S. & Frohman, Roderic P., Measuring Mission: Activating Our Missional Congregation, c. 2019, Private Printing by First Presbyterian Church of Pittsford, NY pp W#2, 5-8

these New Testament functions with the classic statement of the Great Ends of the Church.⁶



What are we to do?

2. Stop and measure what we have been doing.

When we return to our buildings will we just default to the old way of doing things?

Here are 5 dynamic missional factors⁷ to measure what we do. But we have to stop and take time to do this. Measuring does not happen automatically.

⁶ "The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world." Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). (2017). Section F-1.0304 in The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): Part II Book of Order 2017-2019. Louisville, KY: Author, p. 5.

⁷ The 5 dynamic missional factors are excerpted from: Evinger, James S. & Frohman, Roderic P., Measuring Mission: Activating Our Missional Congregation, c. 2019, Private Printing by First Presbyterian Church of Pittsford, NY pp W#2, 5-8



Missional Identity: Story(ies) of the congregation's past which live in the present & will guide its future.

What are the triumphs and tragedies of the congregation's past?

Missional Vitality: Vital signs of the faith community. Fellowship & service-learning in the congregation.

How are individual and group behaviors analyzed and celebrated in the congregation?

Missional Process: Administrative functions of the congregation, e.g., decision-making & communicating. This like a pilot guiding a ship.

Do congregations plan to thrive or will they just sail off in some direction until they have a shipwreck?

Missional Motivation: Internal & external aspects which affect attitudes & behaviors of individuals & teams.

Do our volunteers burn out? What do congregations do to "equip the saints for the work of ministry"? (Ephesians 4)

Missional Context: Geographic site of the congregation's building, & sites of its relational ties.

How does a congregation relate to and interact with its neighbors? How does a congregation use its capacity to influence its community?

What are we to do?

3. Outcomes are what we are looking for.

This chart on the next page shows 2 types of outcomes of the work of congregations: Development outcomes and toxic outcomes.⁸ Although this chart is focused on “outreach” or missional outcomes, it can also be used internally.

	Charity	Relationship Charity	Bonding Development	Partnership Development	Community Development
Development Outcomes	Crisis relief is provided	Personhood is recognized	Isolation is overcome	People are connected	People are self-sufficient
Toxic Outcomes	Dependency is reinforced	Root causes remain unaddressed	Improvement is disrupted	Context is unchanged	Relationships are weakened

It is possible for our churches to continue our long record of “toxic charity”,⁹ or “relief-oriented, commodity-based charity which flourishes because even though its effects are irresponsible, [toxic to the receiver] it feels good to the givers.”¹⁰

What does it matter if we re-gather and feel comfortable again and the world remains unchanged?

Why bother to do all of this? Because the structured, careful study of congregations is a “means of God’s grace and transformation of congregations.” Congregations will experience “openings for ministry for naming and transcending those frustrating blocks to change that we all experience” in the Church.¹¹

⁸ The outcome chart is excerpted from: Evinger, James S. & Frohman, Roderic P., Measuring Mission: Activating Our Missional Congregation, c. 2019, Private Printing by First Presbyterian Church of Pittsford, NY pp. W#7, p.20.

⁹ Lupton, Robert D. (2011). Toxic Charity: How the Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (And How to Reverse It). New York, NY: HarperCollins. Lupton is a Presbyterian layperson and is the founder of FCS Urban Ministries, Atlanta, Georgia.

¹⁰ Sherman, Amy L. (2011). *Wasted charity: Why the ‘compassion industry’ is not helping the poor*. Christianity Today, 55(11, November 1):69.

¹¹ Dudley, Carl S., Carroll, Jackson W., & Wind, James P. (Eds.). Carriers of Faith: Lessons from Congregational Studies. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, p. 188. [Stokes, Allison, & Roozen, David A. (1991). “The Unfolding Story of Congregational Studies.” Chapter 11.]

Will our congregations stop, look, listen and measure BEFORE & AFTER they “cross the street” to return to their re-gathered life? ¹²

¹² For further discussion about this essay you may contact Rod Frohman at cityrevrocvhester@gmail.com.