

A KINGDOM-CENTERED CHANGE FOR A CENTRAL FLORIDA CHURCH

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BY
ZACHARY MCGOWEN
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Over the course of my life much has changed for me in understanding the mission of the Church as it relates to the extension of Jesus' ministry. Having grown up in what I consider a typical evangelical church context, I was essentially taught that the goal of Jesus' ministry was to save individuals from their sins. Jesus died because I, and everyone else who had ever existed was a sinner, and so if I received Jesus into my heart his death would count for me and I would not have to die for my own sins. He rose from the dead to prove that death was not strong enough to keep hold of him, so I could have confidence in living eternally in heaven with him. That was the entirety of the gospel: Jesus died and rose again that I, and everyone who received Jesus into their hearts, would go to heaven. It was a highly consumeristic, reductionist view of the gospel, which is all too typical in North American churches.¹

In seminary, I began to hear something slightly different. Jesus had come and had died on the cross, but his life, death and resurrection were for a much larger end than my personal salvation; Jesus came to inaugurate his Kingdom. While personal salvation is a result of that mission, the Kingdom was the end goal of the biblical message, the gospel itself, and the content of the earliest Church leaders' teaching focused on the coming Kingdom. As NT Wright states in his book *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospel*, "The great second-and third-century Christian teachers insisted, against such new teaching, that God's rescue of the created order itself, rather than the rescue of

¹ Darrell L. Guder, *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2015), Kindle: 52.

saved souls from the created order, was central."² But what does that Kingdom look like, and how does that change the mission of God's people in the Church?

Part 1: A Brief, Biblical Theology of the Kingdom

The impact of a Kingdom-centered gospel comes through as we look at how Jesus even taught his disciples to pray. In what we refer to as "The Lord's Prayer," Jesus prompts his followers to pray for the Father's "kingdom to come, and will to be done, on earth as it is in heaven." (Matthew 6:10) The goal was not for Jesus to be some sort of spiritual life boat whereby his followers could escape the sinful nature of the earth. His desire was to transform everything on earth to more greatly reflect his Father's kingdom.³ Reggie McNeal writes in his book *Kingdom Come: Why We Must Up Our Obsession with Fixing the Church—and What We Should Do Instead*, "The Kingdom champions the life that God intends for all of us to experience on this planet, in this lifetime."⁴

² NT Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospel* (New York, New York: HarperCollins, 2012), Kindle: 17.

³ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴ Reggie McNeal, *Kingdom Come: Why We Must Up Our Obsession with Fixing the Church—and What We Should Do Instead* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale, 2015), Kindle: Loc 150.

The Kingdom of God and the Old Testament

The Western Church today often misses the calling to exhibit life-giving nature of the Kingdom because it truly forgets the kingship of Jesus himself and its roots in the Old Testament. NT Wright laments such a gap by saying:

What I miss, right across the Western tradition... is the devastating and challenging message I find in the four gospels: God really has become king—in and through Jesus! A new state of affairs has been brought into existence... [I]t is about something that was supposed to happen when Israel's hopes were fulfilled; and Israel's hopes were not for the demise of the space-time universe, but for the earth to be full of God's glory. It is, however, an inaugurated eschatological message, claiming that this "something" has indeed happened in and through Jesus and does not yet look like what people might have imagined. That is the story the gospels are telling.⁵

To understand our calling to exhibit the Kingdom of God on earth, we must first look at what God has promised his people for all times and how that is resisted by the effects of the Fall.

The world was created good but was subsequently wracked by sin leading to violence, disease, injustice, and more. In the Old Testament, God's own people could not escape the cycle of destruction that the Fall wrought leading to their exile in Assyria and Babylon. In light of this reality the prophetic promises point to a new Kingdom which

⁵ Wright, 37-38.

will be established by a Messiah, a King, in the line of the great Israelite King David. The familiar prophecy of Isaiah 9:6-7 puts it this way,

6 For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7 Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

The term “shalom,” which we translate “peace” and used here to describe this new King, has much greater meaning than merely an ending of violence. As George Hunsberger writes, “Shalom, the overarching vision of the future, means ‘peace,’ but not merely peace as the cessation of hostilities. Instead, shalom envisions the full prosperity of a

people of God living under the covenant of God's demanding care and compassionate rule."⁶

It is by God's initiative that this Kingdom should come, but it was always meant that his people would participate in its spread. From the beginning, he had called people to multiply and make the earth fruitful, and while the Fall disrupted that calling, when in Genesis 12 we see God choose his people in the family of Abraham, he intended that they would be the instrument of his Kingdom blessing throughout the whole earth even in the face of sin. Looking at this biblical truth, Wright comments, "God is now, through Abraham, going to undo the plight of the human race and will thereby enable humans to pick up again the threads of the project that had been theirs from the start (looking after God's world, making it fruitful, and peopling it), but that had been aborted through human rebellion."⁷ This blessing, initiated by God and exhibited by his people, would be felt in the eschatological "age to come" whereby the promised peace, justice, and righteousness would undo all the turmoil of the "present" age.⁸

The Kingdom and Jesus' ministry

This is the context into which Jesus arrived, and thus the focus of the gospel and his mission is the fulfillment of the prophecy and promise to bring a "shalom" Kingdom

⁶ Darrell L. Guder and George R. Hunsberger, eds., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), Kindle: 90-91.

⁷ Wright, 86-87.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

to earth as it is in heaven, and this means a reversal of the effects of the Fall in all its forms. From the words of what we call “The Beatitudes,” Jesus stated the nature of this Kingdom by those who would receive it. As McNeal writes:

Jesus declared that the Kingdom belonged to the “poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:13) and to those “persecuted for doing right” (Matthew 5:10). Jews and Gentiles alike would be welcomed (Matthew 8:11). But he warned his disciples that “unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven” (Matthew 18:3), and he repeats this idea in Matthew 19:14.⁹

Thus, those who most fully felt the problems in this age, the marginalized, hurting, poor, and persecuted, would more fully recognize and appreciate the life-giving nature of the Kingdom.

Furthermore, in keeping with the aforementioned call to Abraham, Jesus demonstrated that the Kingdom blessings were to be recognized by the entire world and were a counter to any ethnocentric, divisive ideology, or devotion to a religiosity that put position over compassion. “[He] challenged the prevailing notion of his day about who was favored in the Kingdom, upending the pecking order taught by first-century Judaism,” writes McNeal.¹⁰ For example, he elevated the ceremonially unclean such as

⁹ McNeal, *Kingdom Come*, 32.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

lepers (i.e. Luke 17:11-19), the hated such as tax collectors (i.e. Matthew 9:9-13), and those who were considered entirely lost such as the Samaritans (i.e. John 4:1-42).

To complete the picture of the Kingdom, Jesus added to his teachings and barrier-defying relationships a series of miracles and signs of physical healing and abundance. “[E]ach cure was a victory for the Kingdom of God,” McNeal writes.¹¹ Jesus reversed the course of the Fall by healing the lame, giving sight to the blind (i.e. Mark 8:22-26), hearing to the deaf (i.e. Mark 7:31-37), and voice to the mute (i.e. Matthew 9:32-34), and demonstrating his ultimate power over sin by raising the dead (i.e. John 11:38-44). Where there was scarcity, he fed the multitudes (i.e. John 6:1-15) and provided wine (John 2:1-11), and where there was fear he calmed the storm (i.e. Matthew 8:23-27). Michael Frost writes in *To Alter Your World: Partnering with God to Rebirth Our Communities*, “As Christians, we believe that Christ came into the world to bring a new order; to bring redemption, healing and restoration; and to birth a new society of redeemed persons.”¹² The signs of Jesus were the tangible outworking of his teaching and pointing to the reality of the Kingdom come in his presence.

Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension then are the culmination and climax of his mission to bring the entire world under the authority of the life-giving Kingdom. Reflecting on Jesus’ words in Matthew 16:28 and their connection to Daniel 7 passages, NT Wright comments, “It is a move from suffering and humiliation to enthronement and

¹¹ Ibid., 37.

¹² Michael Frost and Christiana Rice, *To Alter Your World: Partnering with God to Rebirth Our Communities* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2017), Kindle: 15.

sovereignty.”¹³ All that Jesus did was in service to this Kingdom paradigm, and as he harkened to the Old Testament’s call to be a blessing, his followers would be motivated to be a community that adhered to the same Kingdom calling.

The Kingdom and the Community

As Jesus came to inaugurate this life-giving Kingdom, thus fulfilling the purpose and promise of God’s covenant to his people, he passes the continuation of that mission on to his followers. The Church’s work is to be an extension of Jesus’ work on Earth. This is the impetus for his words to his disciples in John 9:4, “We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work.” In context, Jesus is about to demonstrate life-giving power by reversing the effects of the Fall in the healing of a man born blind, and in that he gives his followers their Kingdom mission and identity in the example of his signs and teaching. Hunsberger writes that this is at the core of each congregation’s distinctiveness. “‘Mission’ is not something the church does, a part of its total program. No, the church’s essence is missional, for the calling and sending action of God forms its identity. Mission is founded on the mission of God in the world, rather than the church’s effort to extend itself.”¹⁴

This is somewhat counter to the underlying goal that many congregations hold as central, namely church-growth and soul-winning. As mentioned earlier, for many, the

¹³ Wright, 224.

¹⁴ Guder, *Missional Church*, 82.

gospel is about personal redemption which leads to growing congregations. Darrell Guder, in *Call to Witness: Doing Missional Theology*, laments this trend and calls for a change in ecclesiastical perspective. “In [the Church’s] tendency to reduce the gospel to individual salvation, it fails to confess the fullness of the message of the inbreaking [sic] reign of God in Jesus Christ. In its tendency to make the church into the institution that administers that individual salvation, it fails to confess the fullness of the church’s vocation to be, do, and say the witness to that reign of God breaking in now in Jesus Christ.”¹⁵

The response of the Church is first to remember its connection to the Old Testament covenant promises and call. For example, the promise God made to not only bless Abraham, but through Abraham to bless the world extends to the Church through the person of Jesus Christ. McNeal comments on this Scriptural account by saying, “By God’s covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12:1-2, we are people of blessing, created to bless the world as a way of embodying the mission of God so that people can understand who he is and can connect with life as he intends it. This is who we are; this is our identity...”¹⁶

Additionally, Alan Roxburgh, in *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The Shape of the Church in Our Time*, looks at the initiative of God and his intervening for the freedom of the Hebrew slaves in the call of Moses in Exodus

¹⁵ Guder, *Called to Witness*, 24.

¹⁶ McNeal, *Kingdom Come*, 90.

2:23-3:15 as a paradigm for the Church. “Exodus suggests exactly where we discern the practices for joining with God: on the way with real people, as we participate in life in the places where God is acting out ahead of us,” writes Roxburgh.¹⁷ As God compelled Moses into a mission to save the people, so too the Church’s mission is to be an agent of freedom and healing in the same way Jesus was in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

Jesus gave his followers not only a template to follow in this Kingdom-focused mission, but he also empowered them with the tools to do the works he did. As he taught, so too were his disciples to teach, and their good news was to be focused on the Kingdom. “It was [the Kingdom] message that Jesus placed on the lips of disciples whom he sent out to share in the fulfillment of his mission. ‘As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near’” (Matt. 10:7),” Hunsberger writes.¹⁸

Furthermore, as Jesus performed signs pointing to the Kingdom, so too were his disciples to exhibit this power. In one passage Jesus sends 70 (or 72 depending on the manuscript) of his followers to perform acts of healing and mercy. In Luke 10:9 Jesus says, “Heal the sick in [the town] and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’” Roxburgh comments on this passage and its meaning for the Church, “The sending in Luke 10 isn’t about becoming social workers or fixing people’s needs; the instructions leave them few means by which to help people or meet needs. The seventy

¹⁷ Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in Our Time* (New York, New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2015), Kindle: Loc 969-970.

¹⁸ Guder, *Missional Church*, 89.

are sent to embody and announce God's reconciling, healing future in neighborhoods. They are agents of God's actions, and so they take nothing with them, not unlike the Israelites sent into the desert."¹⁹

As the early Church carried with them the mission of Jesus Christ, his followers did the same things he did: in word and deed they proclaimed the Kingdom of God. In Acts 2 and 3, these aspects of the Kingdom mission come together for the early Church. For example, Acts 2, the apostle Peter preaches about the significance of Jesus' ministry, all the while connecting him to the Jewish expectation of the offspring of the great King David. The nature of this kingship then is revealed in Acts 3 as Peter and John are approached by a lame beggar, and they, in the name of Jesus, heal the man. This template, word and deed, underscore the nature of the Kingdom-mission of the early Church.

Much more could be said about the Church's purpose as an extension of both the Old Testament covenant promises and Jesus' Kingdom-centered ministry, but it is enough to say that communities of God's people are called to look at themselves as a means to an end, not the end. The Church does not exist to grow itself, rather communities are to be transforming agents of God's Kingdom in neighborhoods, towns, and countries around the world. Darrell Guder writes, "[T]he biblical message is more radical, more inclusive, more transforming than we have allowed it to be. In particular, we have begun to see that the church of Jesus Christ is not the purpose or goal of the gospel, but rather its instrument and witness."²⁰ Far from being an institution for institution's sake, the Church

¹⁹ Roxburgh, Loc 1143-1145.

²⁰ Guder, *Missional Church*, 5.

is to see the brokenness in the world as an affront to the life-giving Kingdom, and as Jesus responded so the Church responds.

A Contextual Approach to Advancing the Kingdom

The appropriation of the early Church's expression of Jesus' Kingdom-mission to a modern context can be demanding, because we must first be willing to stop, look, and listen to the problems that are present. Michael Frost and Christiana Rice set out the problem and solution in *To Alter Your World: Partnering with God to Rebirth Our Communities*. They write:

Nations are constantly at war. Societies are continually distressed. There's a deep yearning for a different way to educate our children, and a hunger for a new way of conducting business and politics. No one believes that continuing on this same trajectory will make a difference in the healing of the world... As Christians, we believe that Christ came into the world to bring a new order; to bring redemption, healing and restoration; and to birth a new society of redeemed persons. ²¹

The Church of Jesus Christ is called to bring his redemption to neighborhoods in a way that is tangibly felt.

Being attuned to the areas of our community where the Kingdom of God is not visible takes the ability to listen well, and this poses a challenge because Christians notoriously go into conversations in their respective communities with agendas and ulterior motives. As Alan Roxburgh describes it, to be agents of God's Kingdom, we

²¹ Frost and Rice, 15.

should “go lightly” into these interactions with no agenda other than to be God’s representative. Roxburgh writes, “Listening is about giving attention to someone other than oneself. It invites me beyond the safety of formal roles or programmed expectations, and into a space where I hear your story as a critical part of what God is doing in the world.”²² Roxburgh believes that God’s people are called to practice listening to one another and as we listen to each other, we are more apt to listen to our neighbors; in this listening we will hear what is actually going on - the good and the bad.

Listening requires that we come to conversations with no agenda other than a desire to help in healing others and establishing God’s Kingdom. Quoting Luke Bretherton, Soong-Chan Rah writes in *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times*, “Bretherton argues that ‘a church is constituted as a public body through listening to both God and the strangers among whom it lives.’ I would add that part of Christian witness is to empower the other to express to God and to the public body the truth of a story that has long remained hidden.”²³ The healing of the lame in our time may come in the form of fighting for juvenile justice reforms, or advocacy for school funding, or helping single mothers, but it all begins with an openness to listening to those who are longing for the Kingdom of God, whether they know it or not.

Of course, we must remember that God is never inert but goes before us, so we must be willing to discern where God is already at work. Roxburgh writes, “God is the

²² Roxburgh, Loc. 1250-1251.

²³ Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2015), Kindle: 179-180.

primary actor who is out ahead of us in the neighborhood.”²⁴ Listening to our neighbors and discerning the absence of the Kingdom means a willingness to partner with those who have discerned the Kingdom problems before us. Tod Bolsinger writes in *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, “Leaders in a post-Christendom world must courageously face the future. But to do so wisely and well will require first and foremost a commitment to collaborative leadership with unexpected partners.”²⁵

This is difficult if the matrix of success is predicated on a congregation-based model. In a congregation-based model, only those initiatives which lead to an increase in attendance or giving or publicity really matter. Kingdom-focused success is far different than congregation-focused success. As Reggie McNeal writes in *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church*, “Much of the kingdom movement agenda will be focused outside the ‘organized’ church, exercising its influence in the world beyond the church by bringing church into every domain of the culture.”²⁶ This is accomplished by a good deal of humility and willingness to collaborate. “The questions, ‘What is God doing?’ and ‘Where is God doing it?’ now have to form the practices of the church. The church cannot know how to embody the life of God unless it is alert to what God is

²⁴ Roxburgh, Loc. 943.

²⁵ Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2015), Kindle: 202-203.

²⁶ Reggie McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church* (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 2009), Kindle: 14.

already up to and participating with God in the specificity of its context,” Roxburgh writes.²⁷

Listening and humility are also the precursors to prayer and spiritual discernment. Each congregation or gathering of God’s people is equipped to be a Kingdom agent in unique ways, and it is the responsibility of the leaders to guide the people into their mission. Roxburgh writes, “The church is a living embodiment of this missionary God’s identity and intention. This means everything the congregation does is shaped by a missionary commitment to the local context.”²⁸ If a congregation believes it has a mission for God’s Kingdom, then it will be suited to address that mission in specific ways for the good of their neighbors.

We cannot be all things to all people, but we can make a Kingdom impact if we will be open to where God is leading, even if it leads us to a place of discomfort. Tod Bolsinger highlights the necessity of courage as congregations enter uncharted territory. Bolsinger writes, “That spirit of exploration, the spirit of adventure that sometimes inspires huge risks and other times leads to questionable decisions, according to Edwin Friedman, is the key to breaking the ‘imaginative gridlock’ that keeps a system locked into old mental models and outdated strategies even though the world has changed.”²⁹

This spirit of exploration, which follows prayer and listening to the community and God, can lead to pushback and challenges from those who have a more traditional

²⁷ Roxburgh, Loc. 1008-1011.

²⁸ Ibid., Loc. 1001-1003.

²⁹ Bolsinger, 206.

congregation-focused mindset about the churches' mission. Rather than being another program, Kingdom-centered congregations reorient entirely toward the neighborhood and world, and this can lead to dis-ease with church members. Roxburgh rightly points out, "Journeying into our neighborhoods in the way of Jesus is truly counter-cultural. It is not a pleasant project to add to the list of other church tasks."³⁰ With that said, such a journey must be done deliberately and intentionally.

Part 2

A Movement toward the Kingdom in Context - First Presbyterian Church (FPC), Lakeland, FL - a look at themes

Personal development

A leader cannot ask people following them to go where they have not been, so I must make some personal Kingdom commitments in order to lead a congregation into change. This should begin with a personal audit of my time, energy, resources, and a look towards changing Kingdom discrepancies. As a seminarian I was taught that sermon preparation should take 10-20 hours/week, and if I tack on an additional 5-10 hours for Bible study preparation, and 5 hours for hospital visitation, and 5 hours for meetings, what am I left with in terms of Kingdom-impact for the week? Discussing this with FPC Lakeland's pastoral relations committee and then making adjustments to ensure I am in the community volunteering at schools or being more hands-on with the ministries of our

³⁰ Roxburgh, Loc. 1385-1386.

church that are more Kingdom-oriented is a step in the right direction. As Reggie McNeal writes in his book *Kingdom Collaborators: Eight Signature Practices of Leaders Who Turn the World Upside Down*, “[L]eaders seek experiences that serve simply to expand their horizons or stretch their thinking.”³¹

In addition, I will need to develop relationships with community leaders and organizations outside my current sphere of influence who work in very different fields than I do. Having worked and lived inside church leadership structures my whole life has dampened my ability to see as others see, so I need to develop a variety of relationships with others who work in the world and experience life differently. “Kingdom leaders need the benefits of diversity,” McNeal writes. “Intentional diversity automatically and naturally forces discussions and considerations that provide the leader with knowledge and insight he otherwise wouldn’t have.”³²

Finally, I need to take a healthy examination of my own life and create a sense of accountability for the Kingdom life in me. Michael Frost and Christiana Rice write, “Much is lost when we only communicate the missional paradigm as something we achieve for others, forgetting that joining God’s mission is a primary way for us to become who we were intended to be as well.”³³ I would be foolish not to examine where I am not living out of the joy of the Lord or experiencing the peace of Christ’s

³¹ Reggie McNeal, *Kingdom Collaborators: Eight Signature Practices of Leaders Who Turn the World Upside Down* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2018), Kindle: Loc. 1409-1410.

³² *Ibid.*, Loc. 1371-1372.

³³ Frost and Rice, 174-176.

reconciliation. It would be a front to call others to toward encountering the love of Jesus Christ while not doing so in my own life and with my family. This sort of self-examination takes work and auditing of priorities, but it is worth it to go where I ask others to follow.

Congregational development

What would it take to move a specific congregation away from a Christendom model of church life to a more Kingdom-oriented one? I serve the First Presbyterian Church in Lakeland, FL: a (mostly) conservative mainline congregation that has stood for more than 130 years in the middle of central Florida with a congregationally-focused mindset when it comes to its mission and ministry. Taking a longview of developing this change would mean first addressing the internal aspects of FPC that create both advantages and challenges for such a move toward a more Kingdom mindset.

From a positive standpoint, FPC Lakeland has a long history of respect and recognition in the community. While not the largest congregation in the city, FPC's reputation and the make up of its members means that there is a greater chance others will join in conversations with us and create collaborations for the good of our neighbors. Reggie McNeal highlights the importance of champions and conveners. From championing a cause or "calling the party" the importance of this aspect of Kingdom work can yield powerful results. McNeal writes, "When wielded, that power turns aspirations into results in the lives of real people being better able to experience the life

God intends for them.”³⁴ FPC Lakeland is uniquely positioned to serve as either a champion or convener of Kingdom initiatives if its members will be willing to leverage that collateral.

In addition, FPC is a resource-rich community of believers. For a congregation that has approximately 1000 people in regular, monthly worship attendance, we have a large staff of more than 40 full and part-time pastors and employees and a consistent balanced budget of more than \$2.5 million. We are debt-free with a facility that stretches over more than 40,000 square feet on 12 acres of land. Of course, these are all the matrices of a congregational-minded church, but what they highlight is that FPC is in a position to experiment and absorb risk.

While this is a positive, there is a flip side: creating a more Kingdom-oriented, missional mindset will mean the redistribution of these resources and that can cause challenges in the understanding of roles and responsibilities. As an example, Reggie McNeal points out in *Missional Communities: The Rise of the Post-Congregational Church*, with staffing the expectations should shift, “[I]f the church is truly missional, staff leaders are being expected more and more to spend their efforts in the community at large, not just at the church giving program direction and project management.”³⁵ This same process of discernment of resource allocation would need to be applied to all the traditional measures of church success and functions.

³⁴ McNeal, *Kingdom Collaborators*, Loc. 1499-1500.

³⁵ Reggie McNeal, *Missional Communities: The Rise of the Post-Congregational Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), Kindle: Loc. 1225-1226.

One final positive, FPC Lakeland has some very motivated and missionally-minded leaders, even if they would not put themselves into that category. There are some who have created initiatives to provide bikes to those in need of transportation to work, others who have spent years serving in local homeless shelters and diversion programs. There are others who have advocated at the city, county, and state level for better healthcare and drug rehabilitation access, and others who spend their vacation time serving on mission trips. The stories of their Kingdom-work are inspiring, but at times they go unnoticed.

This leads to the first of the cultural aspects of First Presbyterian Church that prohibit Kingdom-work: a lack of understanding of what Kingdom work looks like. Michael Frost writes, “Each of us has an ultimate contribution in life, and that is much more than simply supporting and funding church programs to increase church attendance. We are uniquely called to join God’s redemptive plan to improve the world, not simply to improve the church.”³⁶ While our congregation would affirm that notion, we do not adequately celebrate when it is being done and call people to action in the world as a result.

We tend to celebrate the activities that promote church participation such as Elder Ordinations, the presentation of Bibles to 3rd graders after they complete a series of studies, confirmation of our 8th graders, and fine arts concerts. George Hunsberger writes, “Popular grammar captures it well: you ‘go to church’ much the same way you might go to a store. You ‘attend’ a church, the way you attend a school or theater. You

³⁶ Frost and Rice, 33.

‘belong to a church’ as you would a service club with its programs and activities.”³⁷ The elements that have warranted stage time at FPC tend to reinforce this fallacy, and in order to change the understanding of the church’s mission, we need to begin to celebrate those things that have Kingdom-impact.

The move from a congregation-centric to Kingdom-centric mentality at FPC would also mean a cultural shift in what we view as important in God’s economy. We are bombarded with concerns about church attendance, property maintenance, and budgets. This makes the goal of the church self-preservation and the method of that preservation individual commitments to participation. Roxburgh counters this notion by stating, “[L]ife with Jesus isn’t primarily a private affair or even primarily a church-centered affair. It means we are committed to actively transforming our communities. It calls us away from ecclesiocentrism and church questions, and toward a whole set of disruptive questions about what God is up to and how we can join.”³⁸ This cultural shift would mean a shift in teaching, preaching and congregational methods as it pertains to resource allocation to help people realize the strength of the community is when the gathering of the people compels us to go beyond our walls to positively change our neighborhood and world.

The final theme that would need to be addressed is FPC Lakeland’s “siloed view” of ministry. Like many mainline congregations, the work of mission or missions at FPC Lakeland falls under the umbrella of a single committee, and their primary concern is the

³⁷ Guder, *Missional Church*, 80.

³⁸ Roxburgh, Loc. 946-949.

allocation of a portion of the budget and the maintenance of certain annual projects.

While they have been effective in doing that work, the view of the larger congregation is that mission (and thus Kingdom work) is the purview of a few passionate people or is relegated to special programs and events throughout the year. Hunsberger responds to this mentality when he writes, “‘Mission’ is not something the church does, a part of its total program. No, the church’s essence is missional, for the calling and sending action of God forms its identity. Mission is founded on the mission of God in the world, rather than the church’s effort to extend itself.”³⁹ For FPC Lakeland to make a shift toward a more Kingdom-focused ministry, the church must understand that its entire life is devoted to the transformative mission of Jesus in the world.

A Timeline for Change

Months 1-3 - Internal Assessment

Any change at FPC Lakeland must begin with a robust assessment of the factors that drive ministry life. As Reggie McNeal points out for most congregations like FPC Lakeland, “Success in the internally focused culture is defined in terms of organizational goals. Leaders in these situations focus their efforts on helping the ministry achieve these goals (attendance, budget, new program widgets, improved widget performance). In other

³⁹ Guder, *Missional Church*, 82.

words, the scorecard is tied to activity focused on the organization itself.”⁴⁰ The first three months of transition from a congregational to Kingdom mindset must look at how FPC uses its budget, what activities we call the people to participate in, and how our building is used. This assessment should also seek to understand how the people use their time, energy, and financial resources beyond the congregation.

In addition, this assessment should look at how staff members feel compelled to spend their time. The pressure to attract attendance to events/Bible studies/services may short-circuit their ability to be in the community as a resource, and discovering that impact can help in ascertaining the leadership potential of the current staff model and where shifts need to occur. As McNeal points out, “Leaders of a kingdom movement see themselves in a far different light. They talk about God, not just about church.”⁴¹ To make this shift, current attitudes and expectations that may hinder it must be understood and addressed amongst the staff as part of the internal assessment period.

Months 3-6 - External Assessment

After a thorough assessment of internal resources has been conducted, a deep look should be taken at the community around FPC Lakeland. This would include examining the areas where the Kingdom is not being exhibited in the neighborhood. Darrel Guder comments that discipleship is by definition a process of going out, not gathering in. “The

⁴⁰ McNeal, *Missional Renaissance*, 6-7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

outcome in every instance is to be a repetition of Jesus' ministry with these disciples: This formation is to flow into apostolic witness, into making the good news known to the world. To be called to Jesus will always result in being sent out by him," he writes.⁴²

During this assessment, meetings should be called between elders and staff and civic leaders in the Lakeland community including Mayor Bill Mutz, principals at Philip O'Brien Elementary School, Lakeland High School, the police chief, and others. As mentioned earlier, these points of contact are simply to ask questions and listen to where God might want his people to shine the light of the Kingdom through their good works (Matthew 5:16). They should not be meetings where a set agenda is introduced because we may not know what the real problems are in the community.

Also during this assessment, FPC Lakeland's leaders should identify organizations that are already addressing those Kingdom realities. This may mean sitting down with Boys and Girls Clubs, other parachurch ministries, other churches, and charities to see what they are doing to bring Kingdom aspects to bear on the community (whether they use that terminology or not). Doing this work helps us understand where our singular impact can be magnified through potential partnerships. McNeal talks about this approach when he writes, "Collective impact is a collaborative effort that involves multiple sectors of a community taking aim to improve some aspect of community life or to solve a problem plaguing the community"⁴³

⁴² Guder, *Called to Witness*, 128.

⁴³ McNeal, *Kingdom Collaborators*, Loc. 1437-1438.

From the work of these two levels of external assessment, coupled with results of the internal assessment, FPC's leaders can determine what approach makes the most sense to tackle the Kingdom-issues in the community. Because of the nature of FPC Lakeland's current Presbyterian structure, the best way to ensure that the movement gets the attention it needs is to assign a task-force from among the number of the Session, which represents the breadth of the congregation, to determine action items and maintain accountability among the lay leadership.

Month 7-9 - Addressing the Change

While the work of addressing a need from a individual leader standpoint would need to happen even before the process began, addressing any change at the congregational level should be done after all the relevant information has been gathered and disseminated. Since FPC Lakeland is still under the "information leads to transformation"⁴⁴ modus operandi, a season of teaching and preaching around the theology of the Kingdom would need to be undertaken. During this period, all sermons, Bible studies, and small groups would need to reflect on the nature of the Kingdom of God and how God's people are to exhibit that Kingdom today in its life and work. Some of this teaching would need address the ideological separation a term like "mission" has taken from the broader ministry and motivate the congregation to change.

In addition, we would need to celebrate those programs and leaders that have been engaged in Kingdom work and connect the aforementioned teaching to reality in order to

⁴⁴ Ibid., Loc. 1118.

see it replicated. Through the use of social media, main stage interviews, and the like, we would need to highlight the successes we have already had. This is so important as McNeal demonstrates when he writes, “Storytelling and corporate celebrating will shift from focusing on church program activity and successes to celebrating the lives of missionary followers of Jesus in their efforts away from the institutional settings.”⁴⁵ For example, at FPC Lakeland we have a group of volunteers who spend many Saturdays fixing bikes for people who struggle to have transportation for work and for kids in need. The church has given hundreds of square feet of facility space for the bikes and workshop, and money pours in to help make this ministry successful, yet, this ministry has never been fully featured on a Sunday morning. There is real Kingdom work going on that needs to be celebrated and leveraged to motivate others to do the same.

Also, during this season it would be beneficial to invite community leaders who are identified during the assessment phase to come and share their stories of need. This gives the congregation not only the ability to hear the theology and to see how an issue might be addressed, but it also gives them the chance to see and hear where God might be calling them to go next. As McNeal writes, "Police chiefs, hospital administrators, social workers, city council members, county officials— all can be tremendous allies in problem selling to pave the way to problem solving."⁴⁶ These leaders could be given main stage spots and be given the opportunity to meet with Bible studies, Sunday school

⁴⁵ McNeal, *Missional Renaissance*, 58.

⁴⁶ McNeal, *Kingdom Collaborators*, Loc. 450-453.

classes, and small groups or technology could be utilized to film their perspectives and distribute them throughout the congregation.

Months 9-12 - Responding to the Kingdom Call

Following the season of assessment and teaching, the congregation should be ready to respond to God's call in the community. At FPC Lakeland, this would ideally begin with a call to prayer for the community around the specific issue or issues the congregation is addressing. As McNeal writes:

“Prayer may be the most untapped and underused resource available to the church for accomplishing its mission. Let's face it, most of the praying that goes on in many ministry organizations and congregations is spent on members and member activities. Imagine what would happen if the prayer scorecard shifted to supporting and reflecting an externally focused ministry agenda.⁴⁷

At FPC Lakeland, we have a monthly prayer gathering, and we have engaged in seasons of prayer with devoted prayer guides. I envision utilizing that structure to rally the congregation around praying for individual aspects of the community that need to see God's Kingdom impact. I would also add to that a focused prayer walk in the geographic areas of greatest need. For example, we could organize a prayer walk in some of the areas around our area public schools where we determine there is great need, or walk the areas where there is a high-degree of the homeless population.

⁴⁷ McNeal, *Missional Renaissance*, 69-70.

Alongside this season of prayer, the Session-appointed task-force would then sit down with community groups and leaders to determine the best way for FPC Lakeland to help in responding to the Kingdom issue. As God has partnered with us to do his work, so our response should be to partner with others on the Kingdom mission in the world. As McNeal writes in describing the Church, “Terms such as ‘people’ ‘partnering,’ and ‘in mission’ make it clear that the crosshairs of God’s purpose are centered on the world, not the church.”⁴⁸

From these meetings, FPC Lakeland’s task-force would determine the best way to call the congregation to action. Depending on the scale, I could see FPC’s people responding in two different ways over the course of a three month period of time. First, I envision the small groups, Bible studies, and Sunday school classes being commissioned to various areas of community for missional change. As Reggie McNeal unpacks the strategy of Austin Stone Church in Texas he writes, “Rather than disbanding all small-group expressions and starting over, the congregation is trying to move existing groups toward becoming missional communities.”⁴⁹ At FPC Lakeland, a pre-existing Sunday school class could commit to volunteering with a Boys and Girls club to provide mentors for a local elementary school. A small group could work with the local homeless ministry to provide job training and interview coaching. In this way, the leaders and facilitators

⁴⁸ McNeal, *Kingdom Come*, 136.

⁴⁹ McNeal, *Missional Communities*, Loc. 1986-1987.

could take the lessons out of the classroom and demonstrate the Kingdom principles of healing, abundance, and wholeness in the world.

Second, I could see new missional communities formed with Kingdom-work as their primary impetus rather than Bible study and fellowship. This would be a parallel strategy to the one mentioned above where new groups are formed that are constituted with mission into the community as the goal of the group or a group of individuals who have made the commitment to be on mission in their neighborhoods or where the group acts as an accountability and encouragement partner.⁵⁰ These newly formed groups would connect with the larger congregation for times of celebration and renewal, though the expectation of attendance would be different.

Beyond the first year

The challenge at FPC Lakeland will be to turn a year-long focus into a permanent Kingdom motivation instead of going back to “business as usual.” How do we fundamentally “change...the narrative we’re using to express the identity and mission of the church”⁵¹ in such a way that there is a lasting affect and not merely project-based? First, there is the role of celebration. As mentioned earlier, celebrating the work and outcome of the Kingdom initiatives is vital to replication and sustainability. “The worship gathering, for instance, celebrates life beyond the gathering. Followers of Jesus gather to

⁵⁰ Ibid., Loc 2149.

⁵¹ Ibid., 102.

share tales of God’s work in the world,” McNeal writes.⁵² Regular celebration in the main worship gatherings and the all-congregation communications help elevate the work of the Kingdom mission and its value for the congregation’s life.

Second, there is the role of accountability. On a macro-level this would mean the Session needs to permanently assign a committee of elders to determine, report on, and offer correctives for Kingdom effectiveness. This changes the task-force into a standing committee, and this committee would look at the breadth and depth of the congregation to redefine success based on Kingdom values highlighting the opportunities to celebrate and areas of further growth. This committee would host regular bi-annual events with current church leaders for encouragement and support, regularly meet with community leaders to keep a watch on the city’s needs, and work with the broader church leadership to continue to advance the narrative on Kingdom impact with the congregation. As a result of these touch points, this team could set the matrix for perceived success and thus help define the course for where the congregation is going year over year.

Finally, to turn this into a movement, there must be an on-going commitment to change the teaching, preaching, and vision of the congregation. While information distribution does not necessarily lead to transformation, in a context like FPC Lakeland where such paradigms have been key, a continuing strategy of teaching and preaching around the ideas of Kingdom work, missional theology, the understanding of the offices

⁵² McNeal, *Missional Renaissance*, 52.

of apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, and teacher as found in Scripture⁵³, and how all of these fit into the individual life of a believer is crucial. These themes would need to offer a continuing drumbeat for the congregation to rally around, and all other programs, groups, and ministries, would slowly be transformed to reflect a Kingdom approach to the church.

Conclusion

Changing the paradigms, structures, motivations, and indeed the culture of a 130+ year old congregation will not be easy,⁵⁴ and I can expect levels of resistance to such movements. That said, the movement away from Christendom means that congregations such as FPC Lakeland need to greater reflect the Kingdom values of healing, wholeness, and abundance in a world wracked by the affects of the Fall. Congregations have an opportunity to capture influence, not for influence's-sake, but by earning that influence through love and good works to those God has called us to reach. The old adage, "blessed to be a blessing" is more than a cliché, it is a simple way of understanding the Church's Kingdom call to bring the life of God to the entire world. It means sacrificing our perceived matrices of success that focus on numerical growth and instead on impact. It means re-envisioning how congregational leaders spend their resources. It means preparing for resistance and leading, not pushing, God's people into a more faithful witness.

⁵³ Alan Hirsch, *5Q: Reactivating the Original Intelligence and Capacity of the Body of Christ* (100 Movements, 2017), Kindle: Loc. 3759.

⁵⁴ McNeal, *Kingdom Come*, 134.

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