

Congregations And The Daily Missions Of Their Members

By A. Wayne Schwab

Climbers of Mt. Everest are careful to establish an adequate base camp. Here they find rest, protection from harsh weather, and resources to replenish their supplies for the next climb with its rigors and its rewards. Congregations are “basecamps” where members find comfort, support, and recovery of strength for return to the world with its challenges and joys. As one of many who have been working from this “base camp” view of the church, I’m with a group that has taken practical steps to increase the adequacy of the “base camp” in preparing us for life in the world.

We of the Member Mission Network(www.membermission.org) believe ever more deeply that we church members, in our Monday-to-Saturday daily arenas, are the most effective missionaries of the Gospel. We seek to bring good news in deed and word to every area of our daily lives.

As we do so, we can achieve more than our church’s service projects and resolutions. As advocates for sufficient food stamps in the voting booth and our conversations at the coffee urn or the grocery store, we can help more people than our church’s food shelf can. As advocates for an adequate minimum wage in the voting booth and in our conversations at the coffee urn and in the grocery store, we can provide for more than our church’s discretionary funds can. As friends, spouses, partners, parents, youth, and children, we can focus on the specific needs in our relationships for love on some occasions and for justice on other occasions. Specific actions done singly, in pairs, or in groups work much better in applying the general principles and insights of sermons and classes.

To carry on church life through members as primary missionaries is a huge change - an immense paradigm shift. Such a change moves from building up the church to building up the world. The church finds its role as an indispensable base camp. Worship and various church groups do not wane in importance; they wax more crucial than ever. Church life and worship are sources for each member’s guidance and power for life in the world. We begin to see seven fairly distinct areas of daily life - home, work, the local community, the wider world, leisure, spiritual health, and church life.

Perhaps you are starting to see why some prefer the word “missions” over “ministries” for our life in the world. “Ministry” can be considered as limited to serving the needs of others. “Mission” suggests not only loving and righteous living; it embraces active engagement with the forces that are unloving and unjust in both private and public life. We begin to talk about the seven distinct areas of daily life as “mission fields.”

Do not underestimate the resistance that will arise to this paradigm shift. For leaders to meet and work in genuine dialog with this resistance, they need firm

convictions in a theology of the church and its mission. Further, we have found that the demands for this kind of leadership to continue call for the support of mentors beyond the congregation.

Here are some of the convictions that can sustain leaders of the paradigm shift.

- God is on mission to make the world more loving and more just.
- For Christians, Jesus Christ is the center of God's mission
- In baptism, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we join Jesus' mission to make the world more loving and more just (John 20:21-22).
- One of the central tasks of a congregation is to support each member in his or her daily living as an agent of Jesus' mission.
- Each church member needs the specific experience of thinking through his or her current missions in each area of daily life. Sermons and classes do not provide a sufficient way to identify the specific dynamics at work in each area of one's daily life.
- As noted above, at least seven areas of daily life can be identified – home, work, the community, the wider world, leisure, spiritual health, and church life.
- A leader or group of leaders needs to be living into these convictions.

Where do leaders begin?

Potential leaders do well to begin with discerning what God is doing in each area of their daily lives and about how to join what God is doing there. Some method of doing so is needed. One method is found in the worksheets of Member Mission's workbook, *Living the Gospel: For Individuals and Small Groups*. After working through such a method, it is well for leaders to advise the congregation's policymaking board that, without fanfare and in a low key, they will try a number of steps to see how this approach and the available resources function. They assure the board they will keep them posted on what is to be tried and about the learnings from the attempt.

Next, the leaders form an experimental group. Among recently baptized or confirmed adults or adult newcomers, find those who respond to the goal of discovering their specific missions in each area of daily life. Five who can meet regularly for up to 90 minutes for eight or so sessions are a workable number. This insures each of the five will have time to describe adequately the situation in the specific area chosen for the session. The experience of leading this trial group prepares the leaders for reactions that will occur and the level of achievement to expect in the next steps.

Now, the leaders begin to assess what next steps might work for a particular congregation. Here are some possible choices.

- Talk repeatedly about the need to get out of the church and into the world.
- Sermons, classes, and meetings of group leaders discuss how each of us has seven daily mission fields – not just one.
- Sermons and talks include at least one down-to-earth story of someone on

- mission in daily life.
- Prayers begin to ask for guidance and power in one of the seven mission fields each Sunday.
 - As each weekly class, activity, or church supper ends, find some way to ask, “On the basis of what has happened here, how will each of us live this coming week?”
 - Baptism and confirmation are taught as joining Jesus’ mission; their preparation includes discerning their current missions in each daily-mission field.
 - By now, the official board begins to draft a mission statement that points to supporting each member on mission in each area of daily life as one of the basic purposes of the congregation.
 - Resources are provided for members to view or to read that broaden their awareness of issues in the various areas of daily life – e.g. parenting, the needs of the vulnerable, choices in social policy, etc.
 - Signs, publications, and ads all carry the message of daily mission – e.g. “Join the mission through First Church;” the inside of the church door or the exit from the parking lot reads “You are entering the mission field;” suggest that coffee hour conversions include “Tell me about one of your missions this past week” or “What’s ahead for you this week?”
 - Members join in congregation-based actions and programs that relieve basic human needs and that address social issues.
 - Budget planning is guided by the basic function of the congregation to support the daily missions of the members.
 - Each organization, committee, or group includes in its purpose how it supports its members in their daily missions.
 - Sunday adult forums include focus on public issues such as energy conservation, the scope of military budgets, and the social safety net.

The congregation expects to have conflicts over policies and between members. When they do, working with them is easier because all start from the same basic goal of making the world more loving and more just through the daily missions of each member and the activities of the various bodies of the congregation.

These options are but a few of the many that will come to you and your leaders as they live with and practice the convictions listed in the seventh paragraph above.

May the peace and power of the Lord be with you!

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