

## From Church-Shaped Mission to Mission-Shaped Church<sup>1</sup>

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*Though the missional calling of the church is acknowledged by all, often mission remains just a function among many other more pressing tasks in congregations. This paper tentatively explores the ecclesiological and theological re-visioning necessary for a move from “church-shaped” missions to a “mission-shaped” church. After identifying some clues to missional thinking from the work of Asian theologians, the essay argues that the classical term *concur-sus Dei* is far more effective than the more recent *missio Dei* for such a transformation into missional congregations. Developing the notion of *concur-sus Dei* as the continuous accompaniment of God in creation or the “God-movement” in judgment and grace, it then briefly turns to a consideration of the marks of leadership for such a mission-shaped church that is keeping in step with God’s already up-and-running movement in creation.*

“There is no participation in Christ without participation in His mission to the world.”  
—Wilhelm Richebacher<sup>2</sup>

### *The Challenge*

The central affirmation that the very being of the church is

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<sup>1</sup> The title is influenced by recent discussions on the mission-shaped church in the Church of England. See the report of a working group of the Church of England’s Mission and Public Affairs Council, *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> From the closing statement of the meeting of the International Missionary Council, Willingen, 1952; cited from the official report in Wilhelm Richebacher, “*Missio Dei*: The Basis of Mission Theology or a Wrong Path?,” *International Review of Mission* 92, no. 367 (October 2003): 589.

constituted in and through its participation in God's mission in the world is at the heart of Christian faith. That the church is not an end in itself and mission is not an optional extra to its being was brought home to the Episcopal Church, in no uncertain terms, at its 76<sup>th</sup> General Convention in July 2009. From the reports about the addresses of the Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori to conversations among the youth participants, it would appear that "mission was the center stage." The following words from the opening address of the Presiding Bishop at the very beginning of the convention are illustrative of that fact:

How do we keep the main thing the main thing? How will we insist . . . that God's mission is our reason for existence . . . ? The structures of this church are resources for God's mission, but they are not God's mission in themselves. . . . Jesus' passion was and is *for* God's dream of a reconciled creation. We're meant to be partners in building that reality, throughout all of creation.<sup>3</sup>

Or again from Presiding Bishop Jefferts Schori's sermon at the Opening Eucharist:

The heart of this church *will* slowly turn to stone if we think our primary mission work is to those already in the pews inside our beautiful churches, or to those at other altars. We are in cardiac crisis if we think we can close the doors, swing our incense and sing our hymns, and all will be right with the world. The heart of this body is mission. . . . Every time we gather, the Spirit offers a pacemaker jolt to tweak the rhythm of this heart. The challenge is whether or not . . . the muscle will respond with a strengthened beat, sending more life out into the world. . . . Can you hear the heartbeat? Mission, Mission, Mission. . . .<sup>4</sup>

These words not only issue a clarion challenge, they also raise the question whether, in reality, the "heartbeat" of "Mission, Mission, Mission" is heard among the local worshiping communities of the church.

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<sup>3</sup> The entire text of the Opening Address at General Convention 2009, given July 7, 2009 by Katharine Jefferts Schori, may be found at [www.episcopalchurch.org/78703\\_112035\\_ENG\\_HTML.htm](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/78703_112035_ENG_HTML.htm).

<sup>4</sup> The entire text of Katharine Jefferts Schori's sermon at the Opening Eucharist, preached on July 8, 2009, may be found at [www.episcopalchurch.org/78703\\_112074\\_ENG\\_HTML.htm](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/78703_112074_ENG_HTML.htm).

For we have a nagging sense that there is indeed a “cardiac crisis” at the local level in many places. Continuing to use her metaphor, the question of how we can allow the Spirit, at every level of the church, Episcopal and others, to “offer a pacemaker jolt to tweak the rhythm of this heart” is as urgent as ever. What sort of leadership and resources would such a quickening process need?<sup>5</sup> Or more disturbingly, to push the metaphor a little further, one even wonders whether mission is the heart of many a local congregation. As the Pastoral Letter from Lambeth 1988 puts it, “In many parts of the Church, Anglicans have emphasized the pastoral model of ministry at the expense of mission. We believe that the Holy Spirit is now leading us to become a movement for mission.”<sup>5</sup> The Lambeth bishops, along with leaders of many other traditions and the ecumenical movement, have reiterated the need for a dynamic missional emphasis that propels the churches to go beyond serving only the felt needs for nurture and care.

### *The Church-Shaped Mission*

The pressures of keeping up with the inner needs of the church take almost the entire energy and time of the ministerial leadership. But a congregation—primarily organized around developing and maintaining its own inner life—becoming a movement for mission is simply not possible unless there comes about a radical shift from the “*cultures of membership* to *cultures of discipleship*.”<sup>6</sup> The culture of discipleship is fundamentally a way of being, a lifestyle. Correspondingly, a call to mission is primarily a call to a posture of being “turned inside out.” It is a call to a fundamental reorientation of the church to be a “church inside out.”<sup>7</sup>

It is not easy to break out of the “culture of membership” which consumes much of the energy and attention of its ministerial and lay leadership in meeting the needs of its members. The problem is not new; the church has been defined, over the centuries, primarily in terms of its inner life as the place where the Word is truly preached, the sacraments duly administered, and the people rightly governed. No

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Robert Warren, *Building Missionary Congregations* (London: Church House Publishing, 1995), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Fred Hiltz, “Go to the World! Go Struggle, Bless, and Pray: Bishops, Theological Schools, and Mission,” *Anglican Theological Review* 90, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 307. Italics mine for emphasis.

<sup>7</sup> Title of a book by Johannes Hoekendijk (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster, 1966).

wonder that mission is seen as just “one more thing to do” among others and therefore is often conveniently left to be carried out in proxy by a few enthusiasts in the congregation or to some diocesan or denominational body. Unless the inward-looking definition is challenged, the ecclesiology behind it is reframed, and the equipping processes of its leadership are revisioned, a “mission-shaped” church whose very being is constituted in and for mission is simply unthinkable. It is this concern, I understand, that lies behind the Winter 2010 issue of the *Anglican Theological Review*.

Perhaps a matter of greater concern is that even in churches which seem to be very active in several local or global “missions” or projects, mission appears to be an optional “extra” carried through by a few, with little or no impact upon the being of the whole congregation and its worship, nurture, or fellowship. Three aspects of mission that is defined and shaped by a few enthusiasts may be observed, each of which needs to be subverted if our churches are to be transformed into missional communities. These observations also provide the rationale for moving from church-shaped mission to being a mission-shaped church.

First, in many congregations, mission is understood primarily in “functional” terms, that is, in terms of a number of activities or “missions” to be carried out (note the use of the word in the plural). It is not very different from the use of the term in various “mission statements” by all sorts of agencies and corporations. But such an understanding does not reflect the fundamental missionary *nature and being* of the church; for, as Emil Brunner stated, “The church exists *by* mission as fire exists *by* burning” (note the word *by* and not *for*, since the latter reduces mission to only a function). How important it is to be reminded that mission cannot be reduced purely to strategies and activities for the success of an institution. How pertinent too it is to recover the import of the provocative expression of the early sixties that mission is not a function of the church, but rather, the church is a function in the already up-and-running mission of God in the world. My observation is that some interpretations of Matthew 28:19, known as the Great Commission, have led to a distortion of the church’s understanding of “sent-ness,” from characterizing the very essence and the constitutive dynamic of the church, to being a series of activities which the church defines, shapes, and carries out, often “out there” somewhere. Further, the effect of the Great Commission in sustaining an urge to colonize other countries and “civilizing” other peoples

and conquering other religions in the name of mission cannot be minimized either. As a corrective, it is important to recover the understanding of mission seen in Acts 1:8, in which the risen Jesus promises his disciples that they “will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come” upon them, so that they may be his witnesses “to the ends of the earth.” Here mission is primarily a fulfillment of a promise, a gift of grace, and a spontaneous outcome of receiving the Spirit. When the Spirit comes upon us, we cannot but follow, stepping behind the Spirit who always goes ahead. Intentionally opting for Acts 1:8 as the foundation of the understanding of the missionary calling of Christians is critical at this time.<sup>8</sup> It highlights that the church’s mission is only a response, and primarily a witness shaped by first discerning the Spirit who is already at work. Further, mission of the church is a way of being in the Spirit; it is first and foremost a posture of being, a style of life, before it is expressed in specific and contextual responses. Concrete missional actions arise out of our *being* in mission, being in a permanent openness to God and in God to the other, and to the world. Therefore, all that the church is and does has a missionary dimension to it. An unmissionary church is not the church. The body not broken for the life of the world is not the body of Christ.

In a missional response shaped by an attentive following of the Spirit who goes ahead of us, there is always room for surprises. Mission takes place in unheard of places and through the agencies of unexpected people. As the Spirit moves afresh in changing contexts, there is little room for fixed order and set strategies; things are turned upside down. Philip, the evangelist who was preaching successfully to a large crowd in the midst of a city, is suddenly led away along a desert road to meet a lonely individual (Acts 8). A reluctant Peter is sent to a God-fearing gentile. Peter learns, to his surprise, that the Spirit acts in totally unheard of ways for which Peter and the Jewish Christians were in no way prepared. Without a radical insistence upon the priority of attuned discerning of God’s already up-and-running presence and work in the world, there can be no transformation from a church-shaped mission to a mission-shaped church.

Secondly, as Craig Van Gelder argues, that vast majority of the congregation exhibit “at the core of their genetic code . . . an organizational self-understanding, where the church’s primary identity is

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<sup>8</sup> My extended comments on this shift may be found in “CWM’s First Decade and Beyond,” *International Review of Mission* 76 (October 1987): 477–479.

related to being responsible to *accomplish something*.<sup>9</sup> One of the signs of such a captivity of the church to the “corporate mindset” is the deep sense of “agenda-anxiety” that characterizes many mission committees of larger parishes that have an acute sense of obligation to do something, somewhere, to someone. It is worth noting that even the definitions of the five “Marks of Mission” of the Anglican Communion are formulated as a list of “to-do” things.<sup>10</sup> Despite the rich sacramental life of the church, there is no reference to mission as a *habitus*, a way of being, conformed by the Spirit to Christ’s way. The greater the number of programs that a congregation runs in its neighborhood or elsewhere, the more successful it considers itself to be. Not that programs are irrelevant, but the problem is that these projects shaped by a few enthusiasts have little or no impact upon the core of being of the church, or all that goes on in the church, including its worship or Christian nurture, for example.

Even oft-repeated and unthinking expressions like “building the kingdom,” or “extending the kingdom” are not biblical, and more importantly, as George Hunsberger reminds us, they betray “an imperial or even a triumphalistic approach” to mission. He notes that “in the Gospels, the most repeated and emphatic verbs directing our response to the reign of God are ‘to receive’ and ‘to enter.’ They come at times intertwined. . . . These two verbs represent two image clusters that, taken together, provide a portrait of the identity of a Christian community and the nature of its mission.”<sup>11</sup>

According to Luke’s gospel, when the seventy returned from their first missionary adventure and joyfully reported their successes, Jesus’ response was, “Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (10:20). It is this central vision of the priority of the reign of God breaking in and God’s invitation to participate in that *missio Dei* that gives rise to a mission-shaped church.

My third observation has to do with the concept of the *missio Dei* itself. Text after text on mission—ever since the Willingen meeting of the International Missionary Council in 1952—has articulated a

<sup>9</sup> Craig Van Gelder, “From Corporate Church to Missional Church: The Challenge Facing Congregations Today,” *Review and Expositor* 101 (Summer 2004): 426.

<sup>10</sup> Cited by Hiltz, “Go to the World!,” 309.

<sup>11</sup> George R. Hunsberger, “Is There a Biblical Warrant for Evangelism?,” quoted in D. Preman Niles, *From East and West: Rethinking Christian Mission* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2004), 117–118.

number of diverse interpretations of the concept itself and called for new forms and practices of the church's responsive mission. To a large extent, they have been successful in redirecting mission thinking. Some have referred to this change in thinking as the Copernican revolution in mission reflection and practice, since it shifts the agency in mission from the church to God. However, the new emphasis on the *missio Dei* has its own limitations due to the very different and at times contradicting interpretations of its theological basis, content, and import.<sup>12</sup> An extended study of these diverse interpretations along with their promise and limitations, though fruitful, is beyond the scope of this essay.

Having observed mission practice in a large number of churches around the world from my vantage point at the World Council of Churches, I suspect that the concept of the *missio Dei* in itself might not be adequate for the transformation of churches into "mission-shaped." Though I am sensitive to the dangers of oversimplifying highly complex and lengthy discussions over the years, I would like to highlight four issues that have been critical since 1952.

First, the theological basis for the concept has been founded on an interpretation of the inner Trinitarian life of mutual sending within the Godhead. Apart from the depth of the theological vision behind it which needs to be safeguarded, it has been too abstract, and each interpreter was able to go his/her own way with it. Part of the problem in these articulations of the Trinitarian basis is that they laid an emphasis upon the sending of the Son by the Father without an equal emphasis upon the role of the Spirit. The power of the Trinitarian interpretation can be preserved only when mission is elucidated in the light of the "whole gracious movement of God toward fellowship with the creatures."<sup>13</sup>

Second, the content of the *missio Dei*, in many interpretations, has been identified with the salvation history centered again exclusively in the work of Christ, with the effect that the doctrine of salvation—and consequently mission—came to be divorced from creation; the latter only provides the canvas, the stage, for the former to take place. Hence mission in many quarters is reduced to the "conversion"

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<sup>12</sup> See Richebacher, "Missio Dei."

<sup>13</sup> Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1993), 16.

of those who are outside the church, which has led to a neglect of God's activity in creation.

Third, even if mission was said to be first and foremost of God, it was held that the church is the sole agent of it. All these interpretations have led to various forms of exclusivism. Finally, the more influential interpretations during the 1960s and 1970s understood *missio Dei* so broadly, often with little or no reference to the being of the church, that that era has been charged with the criticism that "if everything is mission, then nothing is mission."

Konrad Raiser, an astute reader of the history of ecumenical thought, has this to say:

To be sure, in both [Willingen and Lund] there was the intention to root mission and unity in God's Trinitarian action, but in fact the christocentric orientation of the ecumenical discussion gained the upper hand. As a consequence, both mission and unity were inscribed into the framework of a theology of history which covered up the ambiguities of all historical processes. A christocentric theology of mission inevitably tends to become exclusive and unable to respond to the challenge of dialogue with other religions. A christocentric theology of the church and its unity is always in danger of developing a "triumphalist" conception of the church as the continuation of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, thus considering the church as the exclusive mediator of salvation.<sup>14</sup>

In short, in spite of the original intention of Willigen, the concept of *missio Dei* came to be used to endorse what I have called only a "church-shaped mission."

A little later Raiser persuasively points to the need for challenging and complementing "a theology of mission which focuses on God's incarnation in Christ" by an "emphasis on the other dimension of God's mission, the sending of the Spirit" (as I have suggested above, pointing to Acts 1:8 rather than Matthew 28:19 as offering a wider horizon). Within such a horizon, Raiser suggests that a missionary church

need not be afraid of syncretism in the dialogue with people of other faiths nor of being co-opted into cooperation with social and political movements which struggle for liberation. Similarly, it need not fear the situation of the small minority nor shy away in

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<sup>14</sup> Konrad Raiser, "'That the World May Believe': The Missionary Vocation as the Necessary Horizon for Ecumenism," *International Review of Mission* 88, no. 350 (July 1999): 192.



the face of conflicts whenever its witness meets with open rejection or persecution. God shapes and maintains the *oikoumene*, the household of the inhabited earth, through the power of the Holy Spirit who works and calls forth witnesses even outside the limits of the visible church.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, what is needed is a larger and more inclusive framework, though necessarily building upon the rich missiological heritage around it.

How, then, do we move forward to a re-visioning of theology, ecclesiology, and leadership in the church which can facilitate the birthing of mission-shaped churches and build up leadership, shaped by a vision of the priority of God's already up-and-running mission in the world?

#### *An Asian Excursus: Some Clues*

In the search for such a wider framework, I would like to identify some significant contributions on mission from several ecumenically minded Asian Christian theologians who over the past six decades have offered helpful directions and insights for a re-visioning of mission in a different key.<sup>16</sup> Christians in Asia have not been direct inheritors of the long history of either the western mission practice or the theologies that motivated and justified them. In fact, the colonial experience that shaped many of the Asian countries has instilled in them a sniff of suspicion in their reading of much of the theologies that sustained missionary activities from the West. Resistance to colonialism and participation in movements for independence or socio-cultural liberation in their respective countries gave many of them the impetus to undertake their theological/missiological reflections in alternative ways from the norms in the West. Their insights, I am

<sup>15</sup> Raiser, "That the World May Believe," 193.

<sup>16</sup> See Wati Longchar, Josef P. Widyatmadja, and M. P. Joseph, eds., *They Left by Another Road: Rerouting Mission and Ecumenism in Asia* (Chiangmai, Thailand: Christian Conference of Asia, 2007); Niles, *From East and West*; Ken Christoph Miyamoto, *God's Mission in Asia* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2007); Lalsangkima Pachuau, ed., *Ecumenical Missiology: Contemporary Trends, Issues and Themes* (Bangalore, India: United Theological College, 2002); Choan Seng Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction: An Asian Analysis* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1977); and M. M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanization: Some Critical Issues in the Theology of Mission in Contemporary India* (Madras, India: Christian Literature Society, 1971). Another significant collection of provocative reflections is G. V. Job, et al., *Rethinking Christianity in India* (Madras, India: Christian Literature Society, 1938).

convinced, can help us move away from the narrow interpretation of the concept of the *missio Dei* and the concomitant ecclesio-centrism that have characterized much of the missiological thinking and practice in the West, and may provide clues in our search for the much needed broader framework.

First, while many Asian theologians, myself included, are deeply committed to the renewal of the church in and for mission, they do not begin with the church in their missional reflections but rather with the world and the people in whom God is lovingly active. Many of them would heartily agree with the statement, “Start with the church and the mission will probably be lost. Start with mission and it is likely that the church will be found.”<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, the starting point for several Asian ecumenical theologies is an intentional focus upon the cataclysmic historical events that have been forcefully breaking all around us in Asia, particularly since the turn of the twentieth century. These provide the raw data for missiological reflections. Theological questions about God and the world are posed not *a priori* (for example, the doctrine of the inner Trinitarian dynamics), nor from a “master” definition of either the Christ or the church. Rather, theological reflection takes place with an astute attention to context and current events, with theologians entering into an active dialogue with the religio-cultural and theological heritage—both Christian and indigenous—through which disclosure of the Divine presence is discerned. In Asian theology, as the Taiwanese theologian C. S. Song puts it, “Context and revelation are forever in confluence. Revelation runs into context and context runs into revelation. . . . We need only to keep our ears and eyes open to perceive deeper meaning in the hubbub of the busy crossroads of context and revelation.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore, an unshakable confidence in the “raw sovereignty” of God and God’s creative presence in Asia from time immemorial undergirds much of theological reflection in Asia.

Second, theologians in Asia work within the conviction that God has been present and active in the revolutionary changes taking place in Asia. The Korean theologian Hyun Younghak puts it forcefully: “I do not believe in an invalid God who was carried piggy-back to Korea by some missionary. God was already active in history long before the

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<sup>17</sup> *Mission-Shaped Church*, 124.

<sup>18</sup> C. S. Song, *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984), 40.

missionaries came.”<sup>19</sup> Others speak of the God of their foremothers and forefathers encountering them in various ways and accompanying them in their history and in their religio-cultural tradition, both in judgment and grace. Therefore a major missiological task was seen as the discernment of the movement of God’s Spirit in the events of our time.<sup>20</sup> For example, Paul Devanandan of India has described the task of mission in India as helping others “discern in such renewal the inner working of the Spirit of God, guiding men of other faiths than ourselves. . . . If all ‘new creation’ can only be of God where else could these ‘new’ aspects of other beliefs in the thinking and living of people have sprung from?”<sup>21</sup> However, this insistence upon the direct relationship between God’s acts and historical events is not an uncritical acceptance of the present or every new development, for God’s relationship to the world is acknowledged as being in grace and judgment, creative and critical, dismantling and redemptive. In dialogue with both the prophetic tradition in the Bible and ecumenical partners from other parts of Asia and beyond, these Asian thinkers have consistently critiqued socio-cultural movements in Asia and Christian participation in them.

Third, the conviction about God’s movement in the history of all peoples—in judgment and grace—leads many Asian theologians to critique a narrow understanding of salvation history which identifies God’s saving presence only within the history of Israel and later in that of the church. Since they affirm that the reign of God is the sovereign and inclusive movement of God in the processes of creation as a whole, God’s mission therefore cannot be exhausted by the Christian story. They view the histories and cultures of all peoples as intrinsically related to God’s creative purpose and act, though the creaturely response is often ambiguous and always under God’s judgment and transforming grace. Therefore the entire world is placed under God’s creative and redemptive activity and God has been active directly among all peoples and in their histories.

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Niles, *From East and West*, 53.

<sup>20</sup> This trend may be identified as early as in 1957. See *The Common Evangelistic Task of the Churches in East Asia: Papers and Minutes of the East Asia Christian Conference*, Prapat, Indonesia, March 17–26, 1957.

<sup>21</sup> Paul David Devanandan, “The Younger Churches Look Ahead,” in *Preparation for Dialogue: A Collection of Essays on Hinduism and Christianity in New India*, ed. Nalini Devanandan and M. M. Thomas (Bangalore, India: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1964), 177.

Fourth, as a consequence of the above affirmations, many Asian theologians insist that the starting point for God's mission is not the church but rather God's creation. They resolutely refuse to separate creation and redemption as two separate acts of God; rather, creation and redemption are seen as two interactive moments in a single continuum of God's relationship to the world. As C. S. Song argues in *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*, "When salvation gets divorced from creation, it is bound to lose its universal dimension and significance. This leads inevitably to the impoverishment of Christian understanding of history and culture [and, we may add, "mission"] and has proved to be detrimental to the wholesome appreciation of Asian history and culture in God's revelation."<sup>22</sup> In the same vein, a Sri Lankan theologian, Wesley Ariarajah, says, "An undeveloped theology of creation lies at the heart of the Protestant inability to deal with plurality. Today there is a new interest in creation, but it is more in relation to the natural environment than about the peoples who fill the earth."<sup>23</sup> I believe that here is an unmistakable clue to the sort of widening of the horizon for a re-visioning of theology and church that we seek and that will consequently lead to a rethinking of mission.

Of course, at this point a question might be raised regarding the role that the perceived special relation of God to Israel and, analogously, the unique role of the church in mission play within the broader framework of Asian theologies. C. S. Song addresses these questions in his extensive reflections on this theme, stating, "I must repeat that Israel is chosen not to present herself to the rest of the world as a nation through which God's redeeming love will be mediated, but to be a symbol . . . of how God is also at work among nations in a redemptive way."<sup>24</sup> The church is not the end but only a sign of God's purpose for all of creation and its mission is to bring to focus what God is doing with all peoples. That which is called to be a pointer to God's accompaniment with all should not be turned into the point itself; it is idolatrous. That which is called to be the leaven cannot seek to turn the whole bread into a leaven lump.

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<sup>22</sup> Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*, as quoted in Niles, *From East and West*, 140, with Preman Niles's own addition in brackets.

<sup>23</sup> Wesley Ariarajah, *Not Without My Neighbour: Issues in Interfaith Relations* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999), 115.

<sup>24</sup> C. S. Song, "From Israel to Asia: A Theological Leap," *Ecumenical Review* 28 (July 1976): 258.

Finally, within the larger horizon of a single creation-redemption continuum, how are we to understand God's decisive presence in Jesus Christ? The Christ event is not an intrusion but a nodal point within God's creative-redemptive movement in creation. But within this process of God's movement in creation, as P. Chenchiah, an Indian lay theologian, states, the birth of Christ is "the birth of a new order in creation." Jesus is "an outburst or inrush into history, . . . a new creative effort of God in which the cosmic energy or *sakti* is the Holy Spirit, the new creation is Christ, and the new life order is the Kingdom of God."<sup>25</sup> He continues, "True evangelism consists in reproducing Jesus. The Indian Christian should harness the Holy Spirit to the creation of new life."<sup>26</sup> Or as another Indian theologian puts it: "God's act of redemption in Christ Jesus concerns the whole of his creation. Biblical faith repeatedly affirms that the work of Christ is of cosmic significance in that redemption wrought in Him has affected the entire creative process."<sup>27</sup>

In the same vein, C. S. Song speaks of redemption as "God's revolution within his own creation" which brings about "radical interruptions and qualitative changes in the life and history of humankind"<sup>28</sup> and creation as a whole. Within such a creation-redemption continuum, Asian theologians find redemption as "the way God intermittently rebuffs the human effort to maintain identity and continuity through institutionalizing the experience of God's free grace into [exclusive, I may add] religious establishments."<sup>29</sup>

In the light of these Asian reflections on mission and theology, I believe that it is possible to go beyond the traditional interpretation of the concept of the *missio Dei*, and avoid some of the pitfalls mentioned above. The significant clues, identified above, open up an alternative framework around which our mission reflections can be construed.

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<sup>25</sup> P. Chenchiah, "Rethinking Christianity," quoted in Niles, *From East and West*, 139.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Robin H. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Madras, India: Christian Literature Society, 1969), 153.

<sup>27</sup> Paul D. Devanandan, *Our Task Today: Revision of Evangelistic Concern* (Bangalore, India: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1958), 5.

<sup>28</sup> Song, "From Israel to Asia," 254.

<sup>29</sup> Miyamoto, *God's Mission in Asia*, 174. Words in brackets are mine.

*Concursus Dei: A Possible New Horizon for Mission*

I submit that such a wider framework may be found in the medieval concept of *concursus Dei* (understood here as divine accompaniment), when reframed to express God's presence and "walking with" all of creation, calling and leading creation into ever new life even in the midst of the persistent creaturely resistance. I am aware of the complex discussions in history, including the work of Karl Barth, around the notion of *concursus Dei*, primarily to address the nature of the creaturely co-causality and God's sovereign freedom in relation to the traditional doctrine of "providence." Yet, I believe that the term can stand for God's everlasting creative-redemptive activity, God's walking with creation, thus leading creation toward God's own self-surpassing fullness. A reconstruction of the vision of *concursus Dei* will provide us with a pregnant motif for re-framing the shape of the church's responsive mission. It also can broaden our understanding of the nature of the relationship between God and the world and enrich our reformulation of the nature of the church within that relation. For at the base of *concursus Dei* is a vision of God's unceasing accompaniment with creation, calling and evoking its participation in God-movement as God leads it patiently and persuasively, both in judgment and grace, to its future in God's future.

In fact, one can argue that *concursus Dei* is a meaningful way to describe what much of the biblical story is all about. As Walter Brueggemann puts it:

This is the presupposition for everything that follows in the Bible. It is the deepest premise from which good news is possible. God and his creation are bound together by the powerful, gracious movement of God towards that creation. . . . The connection cannot be nullified. . . . God "calls the worlds into being." . . . Every part and moment of this creation is like the freshness of the morning.<sup>30</sup>

Commenting on God's call to the deep to "let the waters bring forth" and its response, Catherine Keller suggests, "Creation takes place as invitation and cooperation."<sup>31</sup> She also cites approvingly a statement

<sup>30</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox Press, 1982), 22, 24.

<sup>31</sup> Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 195.

by Womanist theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher: “According to Genesis, then, the deep, the darkness, the waters dance in cocreative activity with God.”<sup>32</sup>

The story of Jesus Christ provides us the classic instance of this “cocreative activity with God,” the dramatic concretization in history and manifestation of the power of the *concursum* of God with creation. It was in Christ’s incarnation that God is confessed as *Emmanuel*, the *Concursum Dei*, God With Us. In this view, then, incarnation is not an intrusion but the concretion into “human flesh” of the divine *concursum*. Through the Spirit of the risen Christ, who is the firstborn of many sisters and brothers, the *Christic gestalt* is now available for all (Romans 8:28–29). In him we discern the sort of transparency to the divine accompaniment that God seeks to evoke in creation. Jesus of Nazareth is God’s sovereign movement toward humans, and around him a responsive social movement of love-in-action gathers momentum, particularly from among those who were at the margins. The church is one manifestation of such a movement within God-movement, reflecting the sovereign accompaniment of God with creation. It is interesting to note that Clarence Jordon, in his attempt to paraphrase the synoptic gospels in Cotton Patch idiom around 1940, renders the term “kingdom of God” consistently as the “God movement”!

God accompanies us by calling and eliciting from us a cooperative response to the new and alternative possibilities according to God’s purpose. When our responses are distorted or in the negative, God, in judgment and grace, experiences our failures in God’s very self and bears their consequences. Thus resisting all that is against God’s purpose, God time and again calls and persuades us to “co-walk” with God, offering us appropriately new and alternative possibilities. Through it all, God patiently and everlastingly leads humans and the creation to their God-intended wholeness. In a sense, *concursum Dei* points to a vision of God’s activity not as one “of unidirectional power acting on the world from outside” but rather “as calling forth a self-creating creation and giving it space for its own becoming.”<sup>33</sup> The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and the continued activity of the Spirit of the risen Christ—all are historical demonstration of the presence, power, and pattern of this divine accompaniment. Thus the gospel story is the story of how God’s story and the

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 240.

<sup>33</sup> Anna Case-Winters, *Reconstructing a Christian Theology of Nature* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2007), 134.



story of creation are always irrevocably tied together by God's *concur-sus*. The church is called to be the firstfruits and the foretaste of the new creation into which God lures and leads the whole of creation.

While we know that in Christ we have been called and are being drawn into the God-movement, we also know that we cannot set limits to the gracious and universal accompaniment of God in unexpected and different ways among different peoples, cultures, and religions, and in all of creation. As a sign of God's new creation, the church's calling is to live, celebrate, and witness to the *concur-sus Dei* by mirroring the divine accompaniment through its own solidarity and compassion with all. Such accompaniment with God, and in God with others, also involves attentive, dialogical listening to other stories, thus mutually enriching each other. God invites the church to stand with God against all that works against the divine purpose, such as forces of domination, exclusion, and death, in our time. The calling of the church is to be caught up in God's invitation to enter into "the total sweep of the Good News [which] envelops God's entire creation,"<sup>34</sup> bringing about order out of chaos. Such a church is mission-shaped, since its shape and actions are the consequence of its being caught up in God's walking with the creation.

### *The Contours of a Concur-sus Dei-centric Ecclesiology*

Before we turn to some of the characteristics of a *concur-sus Dei*-centric ecclesiology, it may be good simply to note in passing that such an ecclesiology is very different from other ecclesiologies, such as the one shaped by the dominant theological axis, centered around the "creation-fall-redemption" matrix. In the latter, the emphasis is upon a christocentric exclusivism which envisages that the church is the only locus of salvation. The purpose of its mission, therefore, is the conversion of those who are outside it and to that end it plants churches everywhere so that the "benefits of Christ's passion" may be dispensed.

In a *concur-sus Dei*-centric ecclesiology, on the other hand, the One who accompanies is always a step ahead, opening up for creatures spaces for "the indwelling of the unbounded fullness of the divine life."<sup>35</sup> But such an openness to God's offering also opens them

<sup>34</sup> Paul Devanandan, *Christian Concern in Hinduism* (Bangalore, India: CISRS, 1961), 119.

<sup>35</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation. A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper & Row, 1985), 213.



for communion among themselves, thus allowing them to cocreate each other in the midst of forces of fragmentation and destruction. By this process, the creatures cooperate with God in increasing the experience of and creaturely response to the forcefield of the God-movement, the reign of God. Mission in this sense is essentially the “increase of the love of God and love of fellow-creatures.”<sup>36</sup>

A powerful image of Karl Barth portrays God as a bird in flight and not a “caged bird.” This image reminds us rightly that the divine *concursum* is dynamic and ever fresh, and therefore the creatures are called to focus on remaining radically open to the presence and call of God and its surprising offer of alternative possibilities. It calls the mission-shaped church to be dialogically open to the world wherein it might discern the hitherto unheard of shapes of divine accompaniment. The religious experiences of people of other living faiths are one such situation. While Christians are called to point in faith and with confidence to the way in which the divine accompaniment has been embodied uniquely in Jesus Christ, because of the universality of the *concursum Dei* in creation we are called to acknowledge that we cannot set limits to the gracious movement of God’s love among other people and in other traditions. Such a reality calls for an active dialogue with people of other faiths and cultures. Therefore, a mission-shaped church lives in the tension<sup>37</sup> between confident witness and dialogical openness to God’s redemptive ways with humans and creation. We are called to openness, that the Spirit may lead us into hitherto unknown truths. Mission in such a context is not to make a person who belongs to another faith an *object* of our converting, but to walk with (*concursum*) him/her as a fellow pilgrim. As fellow pilgrims, our story of God’s movement in Christ is shared and the invitation to experience its reality and power is given, yet with a readiness to hear the other’s story of God-movement and to be deepened by it.

*Concursum Dei* calls a mission-shaped church to undertake all its internal functions, such as *kerygma*, worship, *koinonia*, service, and nurture, as expressions of and responses to the divine movement in the world. In this sense, baptism is primarily an event, as it was with the baptism of Christ, “a solidarity plunge” in the waters of Jordon that flow through our neighborhoods today; that is, a commitment to

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<sup>36</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, in collaboration with Daniel Day Williams and James M. Gustafson, *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 27–39.

<sup>37</sup> See Fred Wilson, ed., *The San Antonio Report* (Geneva: WCC, 1990), 33. See the report on Section I, esp. I.IV.

walk in solidarity and compassion with others, sharing their hopes and tears, joy and pain. As such, baptism is fundamentally a *missional* act, an act of stepping out with Christ for a life for others. Similarly, every celebration of the Eucharist is an acknowledgment of both the sacramental accompaniment of the Divine in all of nature and a proclamation of the costliness of God's walking with creation in love, as manifested in the self-pouring of the body and blood by Christ on the cross. As the word "Mass" implies, the Eucharist is also a sending of the mission-shaped church so that it is broken for the life of the world in remembrance of Christ.

The everlasting and unfinalizable *concurus Dei* in creation manifests itself in diverse ways appropriate to diverse contexts. It is, in the words of the letter to the Ephesians, the "multicolored" wisdom of God in its rich diversity to which the church is called to witness (3:10). Therefore, Christian mission by nature is multilayered and its witness is rich in its contextual variety. It can never be monolithic or monological or fixed. A mission-shaped church knows that God's dynamic movement in the world will not allow us to reduce the good news to a neat, flattened, and "once-for-all-the-same" story. The fullness of the truth of the gospel will be revealed in all its splendor only as its manifold expressions are released in more and more peoples and cultures, as they are brought together in dialogue.

Through the life of Jesus of Nazareth, we know that the natural habitat of the God-movement is always among the poor and dispossessed. A mission-shaped church knows and is ready to sit at the margins of society. Therefore, it is not afraid of being a "minority" church; nor is it afraid that due to its prophetic witness it will be hated by others, both within and without the church. A *concurus Dei*-centered church may boldly walk with those who have been rejected, even if embracing them leads to their own exclusion from circles of power and privilege, as the churches in recent times have experienced. Besides, triumphalism and head-counting has no place within a mission-shaped church. As a provocative statement within the World Council of Churches in the 1960s suggested, the goal of mission is not a "world-embracing church" but rather a "world-embracing shalom."

God's accompaniment is never a passive one; rather, God calls, cajoles, persuades, and disturbs until there is a creaturely response to accompany in faith the One who calls. As it has been said above, God accompanies in both judgment and grace, dismantling creaturely

resistance and willful refusal and strengthening feeble response. The following powerful words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu are applicable to the sort of divine accompaniment that we are considering.

There is a movement not easily discernable, at the heart of things to reverse the awful centrifugal forces of alienation, brokenness, diversion, hostility, and disharmony. God has set in motion a centripetal process, a moving toward the center, toward unity, harmony, goodness, peace and justice that removes barriers. Jesus says “And when I am lifted up from the earth I shall draw everyone to myself” as he hangs from his cross with outflung arms, thrown out to embrace all, everyone and everything, in cosmic embrace, so that all, everyone, everything, belongs. None is an outsider, all are insiders, all belong. There are no aliens; all belong in one family, God’s family, and the human family.<sup>38</sup>

These words sum up in no uncertain terms both the nature of the *concursus Dei*—its inclusivity, its judgment—and its power of resistance to all that opposes the divine purpose, the vulnerable and cruciform way of Jesus of Nazareth. A mission-shaped church will be conformed to the image of Christ both in its missionary posture and practice.

### *Leadership in a Mission-Shaped Church*

Let me now make a few brief comments regarding the hallmarks of those who are called to the task of enabling a mission-shaped and *concursus Dei*-centric church to grow.

*Concursus Dei*, first and foremost, stands for the sacramental accompaniment of God in all of creation and in the history of all peoples. A chief hallmark of a leader in a mission-shaped congregation is a profound sense of the divine accompaniment in creation and among humans and in one’s life. In this context, the broad description of a “priest”—not just the ordained clergy, but all priestly people—by L. William Countryman is pertinent to consider the quality of such a leader. He says, “By ‘priest’ I mean any person who lives in the dangerous, exhilarating, life-giving borderlands of human existence, where everyday experience of life opens up to reveal glimpses of the

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<sup>38</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (London: Rider, 1999), 213.

HOLY—and not only lives there but comes to the aid of others who are living there.”<sup>39</sup>

In many ways these words sum up much of what it means to be a leader in a mission-shaped church. The leader is one who has learned to discern the God-movement by being really present and sharing in the “dangerous and exhilarating borderlands” of our context today. In other words, the leader is one who has learned to sit where people sit, just as the prophet Ezekiel sat where the exiles sat and wept with them for seven days and seven nights (Ezekiel 3:15). The formation of Jeremiah or even Jesus of Nazareth was no different: in the midst of the ordinary, they were able to see the glimpses of the Holy, the accompanying presence of the Divine.

A leader in a mission-shaped church needs to be constantly attuned to the Spirit who goes ahead of the church in mission, rather than relying on precooked strategies and projects; at the same time, he/she also needs to seek the prophetic gift of the Spirit “to nurture, nourish, and evoke a *consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture*.”<sup>40</sup> Becoming a leader is to be endowed with a social imagination that not only critiques the dominant values of our context but also points to the alternative into which God calls us to walk with Godself. This implies that the processes of formation must include an ability to be conversant with the social sciences and cultural studies.

A *concursum Dei*-shaped church seeks to overcome all forms of dualisms between the sacred and secular so that it can witness to the accompanying God in all aspects of life. It implies that a leader in such a church is one who is committed to keep borders porous so that they may be crossed, and where they are oppressive they may be transgressed.

But such a border-crossing across cultures, religions, gender, race, and sexual orientation, however threatening the experience may be, demands dialogical skills across difference. Such ability for inter-contextual conversation is critical in these days as our world is threatened by violence against anything different from oneself. It is critical that the leaders in a mission-shaped church acquire the skills for

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<sup>39</sup> L. William Countryman, *Living On the Border of the Holy: Renewing the Priesthood of All* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 1999), 3.

<sup>40</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1978), 13.

listening to and internalizing multiple stories, particularly the stories of those who have been hitherto marginalized or silenced. It is through such dialogical listening that we learn to create space in ourselves in order to receive the other. *Concursus Dei* seeks to break through the self-enclosed worlds we live in and to build persons shaped across our differences, those whom Miroslav Volf calls “catholic” personalities: “A catholic personality is a personality enriched by otherness, a personality which is what it is only because multiple others have been reflected in it in a particular way.”<sup>41</sup>

An essential requirement for adequate leadership formation—whether lay or ordained—to occur is that our institutions and processes of formation must understand theological education not as an end in itself, but as serving the mission of God in the world. Unless the theological discipline itself is understood as a study of the *concur-sus Dei*, and unless mission becomes the overarching vision and the organizing principle of all formative processes, our efforts in theological education will continue to be inadequate for leadership formation in a mission-shaped church.<sup>42</sup>

However, as one who has been teaching an introductory course on Christian theology for over twenty-five years, to my dismay I have found that our most familiar major texts on Christian doctrines have very little to say about the mission of God or the responsive mission of the church.<sup>43</sup> I think the assumption, in all probability, is that mission is not necessarily a topic within the loci of major Christian doctrines. Since it is part of practical theology, either in the special field of missiology or in courses on the ministry of the church, one might be

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<sup>41</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1996), 51.

<sup>42</sup> For some time I have argued extensively for such a reshaping of theological education and curriculum. See my “Ministerial Formation for Mission: Implications for Theological Education,” *International Review of Mission* 81 (January 1992): 33–45.

<sup>43</sup> See any of the following: Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2008); William C. Placher, *Essentials of Christian Theology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991); Owen C. Thomas and Ellen K. Wondra, *Introduction to Theology*, third edition (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 2002); Ian S. Markham, *Understanding Christian Doctrine* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2008). However, as an exception, see Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland, eds., *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classic Themes* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2005). It refreshingly has a section on mission (see especially pp. 230–238), though even this is tucked in at the very end of a long section on the church.

taught how to define, plan, shape, and manage “missions.” I also think that such an absence of any discussion on mission is due to a truncated understanding of the nature, notes, and functions of the church that has little reference to its central calling to be “apostolic,” sent out as the body of Christ, broken for the life of the world. Doctrines, when divorced from the world that God so loves, are inauthentic expressions of a God whose *concursum* with creation is central to God’s being. Reference to mission cannot be a small appendage to the doctrine of the church. As George Carey, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, is reported to have said, “Ecclesiology is a subsection of the doctrine of mission”<sup>44</sup> and not the other way around.

Therefore, it is pertinent that any formative process of missional leadership takes seriously what a seasoned theological educator, David J. Bosch, says in his *Transforming Mission*: “Just as the church ceases to be church if it is not missionary, theology ceases to be theology if it loses its missionary character. The crucial question, then, is . . . what theology is and is about. We are in need of a missiological agenda for theology rather than just a theological agenda for mission; for theology, rightly understood, has no reason to exist other than critically to accompany the *missio Dei*.”<sup>45</sup>

When theologies and theological formative processes critically accompany the *concursum Dei*, God’s people in local congregations will be transformed into mission-shaped co-workers with God, and the eschatological movement of God’s drawing all things into God’s embrace in a renewed creation and a reconciled new humanity will march on. The *concursum Dei* will indeed be the *gloria Dei*.

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<sup>44</sup> Quoted in John Hull, *Mission Shaped Church: A Theological Response* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>45</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 494.