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## Reclaiming God's Vision for Community Care

*Where there is no vision the people perish. (Proverbs 29:18)*

*I was pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in the Greater Seattle area when a six-month arson spree began. Our congregation was one of the first victims and our church campus was totally destroyed. The metropolitan area was terrorized as churches, businesses, and homes were burned. Six months later, a young man by the name of Paul Keller was arrested and charged with over a hundred counts of arson. While there had been some copycat arsonists, Paul pled guilty to about seventy counts of arson.*

*I was surprised to read in the paper that it was Paul because I had worked with him and his dad's advertising agency to plan a publicity campaign for the local churches. The next day I went to the Snohomish County jail in Everett, Washington to visit him. Paul was surprised to see me and exclaimed: "Pastor, I can't believe you've come. Not after all the heartache I've caused you and your congregation." And then he added: "I've been sober now for the first time in months and have been reading my Bible. I wonder if God can ever forgive me because I don't think I can ever forgive myself."*

*I reminded Paul that he was a baptized child of God and that God*

*looked at him through the cross of Jesus Christ. I said, "God forgives you, loves you, and God still has a plan for your life." Then I explained that while I couldn't speak for the congregation, I forgave him and would pray for him. At that Paul broke down; he wept and he wept. He then asked if he could write a letter of apology to our congregation, which I read at worship the following Sunday. The leadership of Trinity responded in kind by drafting a letter offering their forgiveness, prayers, and support for Paul and his family. That was the beginning of a unique relationship between the congregation, the Keller family, and the greater community.*

*We invited the victims of arson to join our congregation and Paul's family to come together for a service of forgiveness and healing. Then throughout the days leading up to Paul's sentencing and beyond, Trinity sought to be an agent of healing and reconciliation. The incident helped redefine how we saw ourselves and our mission. We embraced God's vision for ministry by choosing to embody Christ's call to bring healing to a hurting world. A new vision statement was adopted: "Through Christ: healing hurts, restoring hope, and rebuilding dreams."*

*One powerful example was a Valentine's Day luncheon held at a neighboring church, as we were still without a building. Paul Keller's dad had turned in his son and so received a \$25,000 reward from the arson task force. George Keller didn't feel right in accepting the money for himself after all the damage his son had caused in the community, so offered it to our congregation. The leaders of Trinity decided to use the funds to provide grants to various community and religious agencies who were involved in some kind of healing ministry, such as the Fire Fighters Fund for Victims, the local women's shelter, and Lutheran Community Services. Representatives from all the organizations who had applied were at the luncheon. And as I read their names, they came forward to receive their grant check. George and Margaret Keller, Paul's parents, were there to hand*

*it to them and shake their hands. In some cases they received a hug from the grateful recipient. There wasn't a dry eye in the house.*

*Trinity chose to build not just a new church but a community center that would continue to be a "mission outpost" committed to providing healing and hope for people in the larger community. Their witness to the gospel became widely known throughout the state of Washington and across the country through various news media. Today the congregation is home to a number of social service agencies and community outreach programs. People from all over the Puget Sound region are attracted to its ministry and it has become one of the largest Lutheran congregations in the Northwest Washington Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.<sup>1</sup>*

Trinity embraced God's vision for a new, missional future. The congregation looked outside of itself as it contemplated what God was up to and where God might be leading them. They had recently celebrated fifty years of ministry in their north Seattle neighborhood and then lost their entire campus. Yet they were able to look beyond the tragedy of the fire to discern what God's purpose was for them in this day and time, and discovered how they could be God's instrument of healing and reconciliation for others in the larger community.

This chapter invites congregations to consider what it means to partner with God in mission and reclaim God's vision of ministry for the sake of the world. We will explore what is meant by *missio Dei*—God's mission plan—and how congregations are invited to participate in making the reign of God more visible in their communities. We will reflect on biblical and theological concepts such as the relational nature of God as Trinity and what it means to live simultaneously in "two kingdoms" as we seek to understand how to be a "church for others" in the twenty-first century.

## What Is God's Mission Plan?

Knowing why the church exists and what difference a congregation is making in the world is a key indicator for motivation, impact, and growth. Congregations where members have little understanding about what their purpose is—why God has planted them in a particular ministry context—tend to generate little enthusiasm, passion, and support. Without a vision for mission, God's people lack direction and face an uncertain future. What the writer of Proverbs suggests may ring true for many church communities: "Where there is no vision, the people perish." Today churches of all denominations are closing their doors at an alarming rate.

It is not enough for congregations to develop a mission statement and then invite God to bless it. Congregations often forget that it is God who has a mission, the *missio Dei*, and congregations exist to help carry out that mission. Congregations are invited to partner with God in God's mission plan for the healing and redemption of the world. The missional congregation understands that it is primarily a missional community of people being trained and equipped to live among the world as daily disciples of Jesus.

God had a plan for the church from the very beginning. It was to be a vessel for the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ. It was to be a church for others. Ministry was not just intended to nurture and strengthen the faithful, for the church was called to give itself away for the sake of the world. The early church had mission outposts that were eventually called congregations. These congregations carried out God's work of love and care in the world in a variety of ways. Today we would define a *missional congregation* as one that connects their ministry with what God is up to in the world.

*Connection* is the operative word. To be in mission assumes that a congregation desires to connect with the outside world. To do so

the church must overcome the challenge of isolation, trapped in a world limited to their own perspectives and suspicious of others. Joel Hunter believes that “the church has grown more and more isolated over the years as it has withdrawn more and more into itself. . . . That kind of isolation in the church started with its institutionalization after the conversion of Emperor Constantine in A.D. 312. Given the power to distance itself from the attacks from outside, and to jettison disagreements on the inside, the church began building walls.”<sup>2</sup>

Congregations are being called to move beyond the walls of the church that have served to protect and isolate them from their neighbors. It takes courage to move beyond one's comfort zone and enter the brave new world of God's mission field. Consider how Broadway Methodist Church in Indianapolis risked everything to follow God's leading in caring for their community. Led by Pastor Mike Mather, they abandoned their traditional charity work and redefined what it means to serve in an urban community. They began to see their neighbors as children of God.

Broadway UMC's leaders have changed the way they view their neighbors—as people with gifts, not just needs. In what ways does this view reframe the conversation? What difference does reframing the relationship make in the outcomes achieved? “The church, and me in particular,” Mather said, “has done a lot of work where we have treated the people around us as if, at worst, they are a different species and, at best, as if they are people to be pitied and helped by us.”

With that in mind, Broadway has—for more than a decade now—been reorienting itself. Rather than a bestower of blessings, the church is aiming to be something more humble. “The church decided its call was to be good neighbors. And that we should listen and see people as children of God,” said De'Amon Harges, a church member who sees Broadway's transformation in terms not unlike Christ's death, burial, and resurrection . . .

Tamara Leech, an associate professor at the Indiana University Fairbanks School of Public Health, has been studying what Broadway is doing for the past six years. Social cohesion, Leech said, is a key

to improving life in what she calls neighborhoods of the concentrated disadvantaged. “The neighbors see Broadway as a place where you can go and ask for help. Not for goods or services,” she said. “You go there for connections.”

Change also is evident in what’s going on in Sunday school classrooms that sat dark for decades. Today, they are filled with an unusual collection of small businesses that rent space, together with fledgling organizations that get space for free. Meeting in the church now is a metropolitan youth orchestra and an eclectic mix of artists and, on Sunday nights, fifty or more gamers. There’s a dance studio and a pottery shop and an office for a small architectural firm. The church acquired a commercial kitchen license, and now people from the neighborhood use it for catering startups.

Church staff member Cathy Pilarski, a onetime doubter, is in charge of managing all this. She still thinks her pastor is crazy. “Certifiable,” she said, joking. But in each busy corner of the church, in each of the hundreds of faces that now pass under its roof each week, she sees something that was missing for a long time—the majesty of God. “I want to make sure that God is glorified not only in that sanctuary but in every corner of this building,” she said. Some of that bustle has spilled over into the sanctuary. Sunday-morning attendance has climbed past 200. But in the Broadway economy, that’s almost an afterthought.

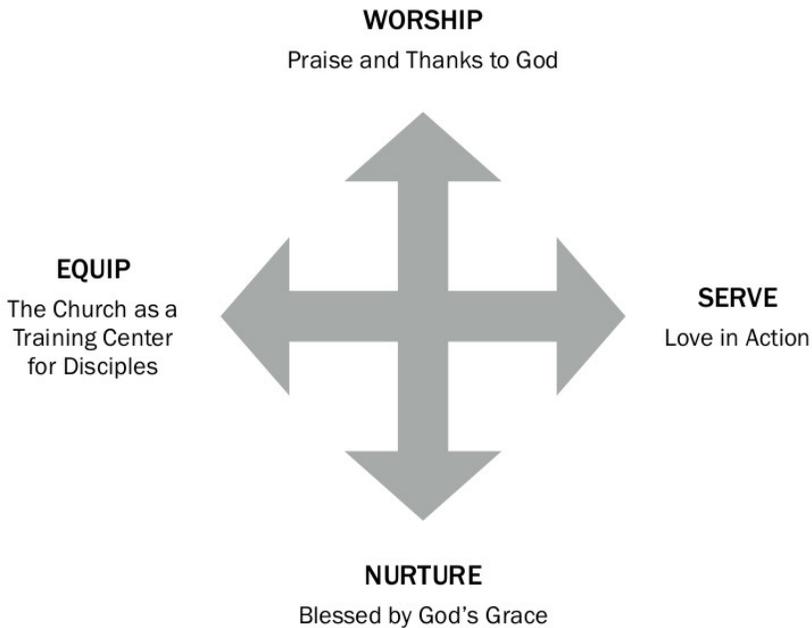
Broadway has died to its old self, giving up the things that were holding it back, said Harges, the roving listener (whose job is to pay attention to the needs and gifts of the neighbors). The church’s resurrection has come from seeking the gifts of others. “Our role in this place is to become like yeast—that invisible agent for social change. It is not about us as an agency inviting people to witness God here. Instead, what we want to do is to see God out of this place.”<sup>3</sup>

## **The Trinity: A Relational Way of Being Church**

God’s mission is all about building relationships with others. Rather than being self-centered and preoccupied with themselves, congregations are encouraged to reach out to others. By nature, our triune God models what it means to be relationship-centered. Our three-in-one God is made manifest in the persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God desires that the church as the body of Christ

replicate this divine nature by interacting with the world around it. Congregations are called to work through outside relationships, not just inside programs.<sup>4</sup>

The church by God's design is both transcendent and relational. As seen by the illustration below, the Christian faith likewise can be described as being both vertical and horizontal. One could say that the church has "cross purposes," with the vertical arm of the cross connecting it with God's love and grace, and the horizontal arm inviting God's people into relationship with others. In some ways, the cross below reflects the fourfold purpose of the church as it lives out its God-given mission in the world.



Nurture comes from spiritual practices such as reading and hearing the Word of God. We discover God's grace poured out through love and forgiveness in the person of Jesus Christ. In response, God's people praise God in worship, offering thanksgiving for all that God

has done. In worship we rejoice in the new creation that one becomes through baptism, and how that gift of new life is renewed in the celebration of the Eucharist. This leads God's people from the vertical to the horizontal, as they seek to be equipped as disciples of Jesus. Finally, living lives of service, they live out their baptism by loving and caring for others.

The church is called to reflect the image of the triune God by connecting with others. As Jesus sent the disciples, so God sends the church out into the world. "Understanding the Triune God as a sending God is foundational for understanding how the church is called and sent to participate in God's mission in the world. This perspective understands that the Triune God is intimately involved with the created world. The Triune God is a God that both creates and redeems. . . . God sent the Son into the world to accomplish redemption, and the Father and the Son continue to send the Spirit into the world to create the church and lead it into participation in God's mission."<sup>5</sup>

### **Sharing in the Reign of God**

Jesus raised quite a ruckus in Nazareth the day he preached on a text from Isaiah. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."<sup>6</sup> The worshipers were scandalized when Jesus dared to suggest that he was the fulfillment of this prophecy. He had come to usher in the year of God's favor, God's reign of grace for all people.

Congregations need to be reminded that God sent the church into the world to be a visible sign of the reign of God, that is, to be agents of peace, justice, and love. From the days of the early church, the church was called to be countercultural, often standing