



Missional Journal

David G. Dunbar, President

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Missional Antibodies?

In this edition of the *Journal* I want to begin a series of reflections on the leadership qualities needed for the missional church. A recent article in the *New York Times*[1] suggests a starting point for our discussion.

The focus of the article is the transition at Eastman Kodak from film to digital technology. That transition is now in full swing, but Kodak is late getting into the digital game. It is ironic that they have only focused the company in this direction over the last five years since the first digital camera was invented in the 1970s by Steven J. Sasson, a Kodak employee!

The technical people at Kodak loved Sasson's prototype, but the *leadership* at Kodak was less than enthusiastic. Sasson explains, ". . . it was filmless photography, so management's reaction was, 'that's cute--but don't tell anyone about it.'" Kodak was so deeply invested in the reigning film technology that it was nearly impossible for the decision-makers to imagine that physics would become more important to their world than chemistry. In the words of Bill Lloyd, chief technology officer at Kodak, "It seems Kodak had developed antibodies against anything that might compete with film."

This is not an uncommon story in our world of discontinuous change. Past success has a downside--**it can inoculate individuals and organizations against the very adaptations that might allow them to thrive in a new context.**

The relevance of this and similar stories for missional Christians is obvious. The church in the West is deeply indebted to the models of Christendom and the styles of leadership that grew up in the modern period. But those models are struggling. Change is needed and it will not be easy, nor will it be desired by many. However, the growing crisis in our churches presents what may be a change-or-die scenario. According to the *Times* article it took a "near-death experience" to overcome Kodak's resistance to the new technology. As some declining churches stare death in the face we have to ask, "Is this God's 'severe mercy,' brought about to help us think outside the box of Christendom?"

Re-imagining leadership

A number of writers have issued calls for re-imagining leadership roles

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within the church. **Harvie Conn** identifies and critiques two dominant models in the Western concept of ministry:

1. Pastor as pedagogue
2. Pastor as professional

Conn argues that the minister-as-teacher model (pedagogue) is deeply indebted to Greek philosophical currents that flowed into the church, especially through the influence of the Alexandrian fathers Clement and Origen. While this rationalizing tendency has been challenged over the centuries (particularly during the early years of the Reformation), "cognitive abstractionalism" remains a strong element in our current understanding of ministry.

Conn also critiques the "professionalization" of ministry which values **credentials over spiritual gifts and accentuates the contrast between clergy and laity.**[2] **John Piper** sounds a similar note, but with greater passion: "We pastors are being killed by the professionalizing of the pastoral ministry. . . . Professionalism has nothing to do with the essence and heart of the Christian ministry. The more professional we long to be, the more spiritual death we will leave in our wake." [3]

Alan Roxburgh discusses the anxiety over marginalization that has led pastors in late modernity to "the continual search for ways to reconfigure pastoral identity." This has resulted in three common images, all of which he argues, remain within the paradigm of modernity.

1. the therapeutic - pastor as counselor
2. the technical-rational - pastor as CEO/manager/entrepreneur
3. the creator of community - pastor as facilitator of body-life [4]

Less is more

These critiques highlight two important issues that need to be addressed by leaders in the missional church. The first is the tendency toward elitism in current models of leadership. The pastor as scholar/teacher and as technician/professional reinforces a strong top-down understanding of spiritual authority and ministry. The expectation is that ministry leaders can (or should) know it all and do it all. This of course puts more pressure on pastors to "prove" themselves in a culture of rising leadership expectations. They must preach with excellence, manage budgets and staff with efficiency, articulate a compelling vision of the future, develop a strategic plan, and of course maintain a model family life.

Statistics on pastoral burn-out confirm that most leaders cannot live up to these expectations. Nor should they. The NT presents the church as an organism comprised of many diverse spiritual gifts, all needed for the healthy function of the body. For much of the history of the church this picture of unity-in-diversity has been threatened by a clergy-laity distinction which suggests a qualitative distinction between the ministerial class and the "ministered-to" class. The modern turn toward professionalism only serves to increase the distance between these groups. **Little wonder many pastors report that they are lonely, isolated, and without close friends.**

The future demands that pastors become less so that they can become more. They need to become more the wise discerners and encouragers of the Spirit's work to equip the congregation for "mission" - and less the experts with all the answers. **Tim Keel** says that leaders must become *environmentalists*. "Good environmentalists create settings of trust that allow diverse people with varied experiences to come together in order to engage each other in nonterritorial ways that allow a community to apprehend all of the different potentialities that emerge in such an environment of engagement." [5]

Of course, to see leadership changes of this order, pastoral job descriptions will need to be re-written and the expectations of boards and congregations will need to change. Church members who view the gospel primarily as a promise to meet their felt needs will find it hard to conceive of pastors as less than professional providers of spiritual goods and services.

From church to kingdom

A second issue that needs to be addressed is the tendency of church leaders to focus their energy too exclusively on the inner workings of the church. The church in Christendom functioned near the center of cultural power and influence. In that context it was easier to confuse the church with the kingdom of God--God's saving action (the coming of the kingdom) was believed to take place in the church. Mission was easily confused with ministry and pastoral leadership became largely congregation and building centered.

In a post-Christendom world we are taking a closer look at the church-kingdom connection. The kingdom is the active reign of King Jesus, in whom God is reconciling the entire world to himself. In this view the kingdom includes the church but extends beyond it. The Spirit of God is already at work in the world outside the congregation and invites the church to share in the ministry of reconciliation.

Using this perspective the church needs leaders called to lead God's people in engaging with their surrounding context rather than focused solely on congregational maintenance. **Alan Hirsch** describes this kind of leadership as "apostolic influence" that encourages congregations to look outside themselves, to see opportunities and engage those opportunities with boldness. "It is this more bottom-up, highly relational quality of leadership that characterizes true apostolic influence. We have been so captivated by hierarchical, top-down conceptions of leadership, be it that of bishops, superintendents, pastors, and CEO-type leaders, that we have inadvertently blocked the power latent in the people of God." [6]

Living Hope Community Church is a congregation seeking to make the missional turn. Pastor **Eugene Miller** is a graduate of Biblical Seminary and an illustration of what Hirsch calls an apostolic leader. Under his leadership the church has worked intentionally to connect with its surrounding communities. Pastor Miller has modeled an incarnational life-style by engaging his neighbors with hospitality, heading the committee of volunteers for a local arts festival, and serving on the town planning council. This kind of leadership-by-example has encouraged the entire congregation to see itself as "the sent people of God" and has

produced a number of missional outreaches in the surrounding communities initiated by members of the congregation. The role of pastors and elders in this context is not to staff or control the outreach, but to keep the focus on the overall mission and encourage congregational creativity.

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Of course, the problems we face will not be solved merely by suggesting that pastors embrace a new paradigm of leadership. Current leadership models are dictated in large measure by the cultural expectations of Western churches and by the theological training provided by seminaries and bible colleges. In both churches and seminaries there are plenty of "antibodies" ready to suppress any outbreak of the missional virus! Unless the climate changes, missionally-inclined leaders will increasingly choose to work outside the system.

I believe this is a good starting place for conceptualizing missional leadership. Such leadership will be forward looking. It will recognize that the models of the past are not adequate for the future. Missional leaders will be alert to the presence of antibodies taking the form of resistance to change. And they will be willing to question not only organizational dynamics but also their own self-understanding as Christian leaders.



[1] <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/02/technology/02kodak.html>

[2] *Eternal Word and Changing World* (Zondervan, 1984), pp. 272-81.

[3] *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* [Broadman & Holman, 2002], p. 1. For both Piper and Conn, "professionalization" means more than simply full-time financial support in ministry.

[4] *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership, & Liminality* (Trinity Press International, 1997), pp. 18-22.

[5] *Intuitive Leadership* (Baker, 2007), p. 206.

[6] *The Forgotten Ways* (Brazos, 2006), p. 163.