
The Ministry of the Missional Church follows up van Gelder’s previous volume The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit (2000), which argued that the church was essentially missional and should develop in line with its mission. Here Van Gelder builds on those earlier ideas to look at how the church puts its missional character into practice.

First, he puts forward a biblical understanding of the ministry of the Spirit as a framework for the work of the church (chapter 2). This ministry is not free-floating or a-temporal, for churches need to understand their contexts and the historical processes that have shaped them. Still, the provisional nature of context should prompt congregations to consider the implications of encompassing transformations; if contexts change, chapter 3 suggests, patterns of ministry must also evolve. Chapter 4 distinguishes the missional church from the established corporate forms of church, a contrast clearly shaped by the US context. Nevertheless, the three models of church that are compared are not without their value elsewhere, since the impulses shaping the US church scene are not unique to that country.

Chapter 5 deals with decision-making and the incorporation of biblical and theological reflection into the process. Chapter 6 explores how organizational theory may affect the activity of a missional church. Rather than seeing itself as a closed system, a congregation should consider itself an open one with porous boundaries between self and context. This is an approach that elsewhere has been characterized by asking whether a congregation considers itself to have clear or fuzzy boundaries (as in the Emmaus material produced by the Church of England). Finally, chapter 7 describes how different kinds of change evoke different reactions, and the cycles which typically characterize cycles of change. Yet this is no mere regurgitation of business practice, for van Gelder is sensitive to the differences between the typical congregation and its context compared to industrial and other institutions.

Anyone expecting a blueprint of how to be a missional congregation through a quick fix will probably find this book unsatisfying, but that means they will have failed to grasp the fundamental ideas governing van Gelder’s work. He has purposefully avoided automatic answers. Instead he gives a series of steps and ideas that ministerial leaders may use to analyze their own situation, and then fine-tune to their own context. As with Plato’s cave, quick answers are shunned: the shadow of a model on the wall is no alternative to the hard task of climbing out into the realm above.

There is no mistaking the wealth of experience from which van Gelder writes. I often found myself reminded of situations and reactions encountered in parochial meetings and decision-making, so that I underwent a number of “Ouch! That could be us” moments. No doubt the steps he suggests are germane to many contexts, and this is a book that should not be ignored by folk elsewhere simply because the writer has clearly set it in his own US context. After all, what else could such a contextual theologian do?

Finally, the difficulties of bringing theological reflection into the more mundane aspects of parochial life and decision-making are well known, but van Gelder stresses that doing so is an essential first step. His pneumatic ecclesiology demands that parishes and their leaders...
begin with a stronger theological mandate, the *missio Dei*, than the survival of the parish, diocesan, or ecclesiastical unit.

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