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living and leading in the way of Jesus

The future?

In his book *Jesus on Leadership* C. Gene Wilkes, an American church leader suggests that 'Jesus came to show us what life in the kingdom looked like, not to modify how the world did things.'

This insight seems fundamental not just for leaders in the United States but also for those exercising leadership in this context.

At a global level humanity will be facing huge issues in the next 10 to 20 years – questions of sufficiency of food, water and energy, the continuing uncertainty regarding the climate, the on-going threats of violence and terrorism, and the fundamental re-alignment of the global economy. At a local level all the above will have their impact, and society and communities will come under increasing tension and stress.

All these areas will raise fundamental questions for those in leadership within the Christian community. It becomes ever clearer that the missional landscape we are now crossing is unlike anything we have faced before and it will require vision, courage and clear thinking if we are to re-engage with our culture and share something of the kingdom of Jesus – to become a visual aid of the life into which he calls us.

As we think about the leadership which will be required the following seem fundamental.

1. Creating a prophetic community

So many present church members appear to understand their faith simply in terms of a personal relationship with Jesus and the promise of eternal life which that brings. Such a deep and personal relationship is fundamental for Christian

discipleship, but a study of Acts makes it clear that the early Christian community saw that relationship fuelling its prime purpose. They realised they were called to live in such a way that the possibilities of the kingdom which Jesus came to bring, and of which he is Lord, might be experienced and lived out into the present moment.

That early Christian community was not shaped by the culture and values of their context, but rather, as they lived in the power of the Spirit, they brought the promise of the future renewal of creation into the present moment. This is the prophetic life to which the Spirit continues to call us and for which he empowers us.

2. Creating a missional community

As we begin to live with this prophetic cutting edge so we will discover afresh what it means to live as a missional community. Paul is quite clear in his letters that the Christian community is called to be the body of Christ. This is not to be seen as a metaphor or simile – it is who we are (Galatians 4:19). As such the Church is called to share the mission heart of Jesus.

The gospels make it clear that Jesus saw the whole of his life as living out the mission purposes of the Father. Mission was not one activity amongst many to which he was called – mission was his heart beat; mission was the focus of all that he was, said and did, and finds its fulfilment in the path to the cross and the giving of himself in the ultimate act of sacrifice. This is the way into which he calls his community – to live with that constant mission focus of the Father and to walk the way of service and self-giving.



3. Creating a disciplined and discipling community

For the three years of his ministry Jesus was clear that the disciples were learning from him the ways and purposes of the Father, so that they could enable the embryonic Christian community to become the visual aid of the kingdom which he had come to bring. This was a huge challenge to his followers as they had to let go of old perceptions and understandings and have the willingness to be challenged into new ways of thinking and being. This was not an academic exercise in a class room, but rather practical experience as they followed him and were sent by him to proclaim the kingdom.

So frequently today, discipleship is seen solely in terms of becoming good church members. We need to recognise afresh that it is learning to be part of a community that is enabling every member not to be shaped by the culture of the present age, but rather by the promise of the new creation (Romans 8, Colossians 1, Revelation 21). Discipling is a whole life challenge and takes the whole of life, both in years and understanding, as we continue to allow the Spirit to inform, shape and motivate us in the ways of the kingdom.

4. Creating a community with imagination, creativity and innovation

If we are to take seriously the call to Christian community and to re-engage missionally with this generation there will be the necessity to think and then live in new ways. This will be a huge challenge for many, and some will find the journey too hard to take. However, there are many who are ready and indeed longing to 'travel out' from 'Church as is' and to explore living as Christ's community in new ways.

Some want to explore the insights from the monastic life, and discover what it means to live as community shaped by a rhythm of life, focused and shaped by a missional purpose.

Others want to explore afresh God's creativity and innovation for the creation of spiritual, social

and economic capital for the transformation of individuals and communities. There is a growing ground swell to follow the Spirit into the new ways he is showing us.

The Spirit's call is for Christian communities to be radical in the sense of going back to our roots and discovering afresh the Lord's calling and purpose. This will demand bold and courageous leadership – leadership which is willing to take risks and explore the new possibilities and ways which the Spirit is opening up to us. In many ways this is not about 'freshening up' the Church, but rather a moment of metamorphosis, when the earth bound caterpillar is transformed and flies as the beautiful butterfly.

So then – what then?

For those in leadership positions within the Church today there is the fundamental need to be open to the Spirit and his leading as we seek to traverse the emerging mission landscape and re-engage with our culture and society. As with the early church, the ways of the Spirit may surprise and even challenge us, but together we need to discern his will and then, obediently, walk in his way.

This leads to a second fundamental. A key to the future will be willingness to network together, so that we might listen to the Spirit and discern his leading. The role of leadership, especially for those called to pioneer, can often be a lonely one. There will be the necessity for mutual encouragement and support as well as learning together.

Finally, and central to all this, will be the need to recognise those whom the Spirit is calling and equipping to begin this journey. There are many within our churches eager to 'travel out' and explore missional Christian Community in new ways. It will take envisioned and courageous leadership to enable this to happen.

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For reflection

As a leader am I ready and willing to:

- Recognise the challenging mission situation now facing us – both globally and locally?
- Recognise that some are ready to travel out to explore missional communities in new ways? How can I learn with them and then release, equip and support them?
- Recognise the need to hold the unity of Christ's body within diverse expressions. How might I enable this to happen?

