

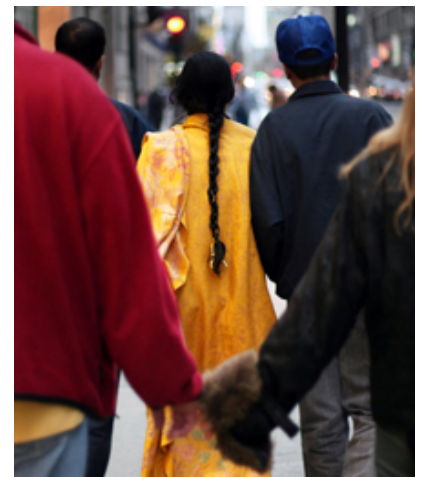


DISCOVERING GOD'S INITIATIVES IN THE MIDST OF ADAPTIVE CHALLENGE

Caminante, no hay camino. Se hace camino al andar.

- Antonio Machado¹¹

Those of us formed and framed by Western late modernity have tended to believe we can find our way, with enough study, focus and determination. Be it the physical or social sciences, be it politics, economics, theology, or even church planting, we have often understood our task as clarifying, defining, mapping and doing. But as the church seeks to be faithful to the Gospel in the midst of adaptive challenges we are reminded that following Jesus, and being a faithful church, is a journey of discovery. Many of the biblical images of a faithful church in mission point us toward the reality of exile or of a people on the way. It is because we are a pilgrim people attentive to where God is leading us that we can discover new things, that we can discern where the Spirit of God is doing new things in new ways.



The magisterial reformers grasped this when they defined one of the signs of a faithful church as

semper reformanda; being a faithful church is always about being an *ecclesia semper reformanda est*. If we are to be a faithful church in our generation we need to embark on a journey that does not have a clear end point, other than the heavenly city whose architect is God. This is a journey of discovery, of recognizing that God continues to work in the world, often in ways that seem mysterious to us.

Our current world situation calls us, anew, to remember that the church, and all of creation, is the Lord's and that the Spirit continues to work in our world. The history of the church, and of Israel in the Old Testament, shows us that there are times when the people of God seem to lose sight of their task or when they seem unprepared for the new challenges they are facing. When the church has found itself in these types of situations some of the faithful have opted to look for renewal or reformation, to be attentive to new ways in which God might be working. This includes repentance; a recognition of personal and communal responsibility for the situation. But there is also a willingness to be attentive to new ways and models when the challenges are adaptive.

Clearly we are now in a disorienting world, in the midst of situations where cause and effect often do not seem connected. Because most of our churches were framed in a different era, they often seem unable to even understand, much less respond, to what is happening.

But because we believe that God continues to work we want to be attentive to what the Spirit is doing today. Part of the attentiveness means having a prayerful and Spirit oriented life, something being addressed by another essay. But it is an indispensable part of a discovery process. Are we prepared to hear the Spirit today? Another part of the journey is the willingness to use the gifts of discernment to recognize where God is working today. This includes not only attentiveness to the present, but also to church history. How have we seen God work in the past? What can we learn from those interventions? A third way of being attentive to the new is by experimenting. What is God blessing as we seek new ways of being faithful in new circumstances? We recognize that this journey will raise many questions and that the path will not be clear. But we want to be attentive; ready to go where God is guiding us. Even though there is no clear path before us, we know that the Lord of the Church and the Lord of creation is with us and has pointed the way forward toward the heavenly city.

Toward a Life of Attentiveness to God - In Expectation

During times of difficulty and complexity, God's people can become discouraged and unfocused. Some times the difficulties can also be linked to a lack of faithfulness or to loss of commitment. At various times in the Old Testament we find that the people lost sight of God's goal for their lives. They found it particularly difficult to be faithful and had reduced their vision to the vision of the world around them. At other times the issues and problems were such that the past did not seem to be able to give them enough tools to deal with the new realities.

It is here that the spiritual disciplines described in another essay are part of the formation of discernment and discovery. Through the spiritual disciplines we create a situation where we can be

open to new possibilities, where we can live in expectation of what God is going to do in our midst. But the spiritual disciplines also invite us to seek after God today and to be attentive to how God is working, often in unexpected ways.

The spiritual disciplines also remind us that before plans and answers we need to wait on God. For many of us this is also a call to conversion. Because we were framed by modernity we are still stuck in plans and not expectations. Disciplines also make us open to listening to those God puts in our midst, people that God wants to use to speak into our lives and ministries.

The Spirit Blows Where It Will - Where are We Looking?

When one reads the Bible and the history of the church one sees moments when human history seems to be on the edge. Societies, nations or communities seem to have lost their way. The people of God are either caught in the same situation or do not seem able to see where God might be at work. During these times of adaptive challenge many give up. But as some pray and seek out God renewal, change and reformation come out of those most difficult times.

Because we know that the Spirit works in new ways, and because the Spirit has guided the people of God in the midst of complex situations in the past, we want to be attentive to the new things that God is doing. One of the places where we can seek pointers toward the future is by looking at the past, at the ways God has worked in other times of crisis. Renewal movements throughout church history provide us with pointers toward some of the key factors we can anticipate as we seek new ways of looking forward and expecting God to work. We need new eyes to see the new places where God is at His mission for the world.

In his book *La Fe en la Periferia de la Historia*^[2], John Driver invites us to be attentive to movements of reform and renewal to get a sense of how God works on the margins among those ready to see God work in new ways. He helps us think about what we should be looking for. Where would we find the Spirit and how would we know it was the Spirit? Driver invites us to look for movements that have “demonstrated a unique capacity to discern God’s salvific and restorative intent and have taken the risk of living according to the redemptive alternative, serving as a fount of authentic blessing to their respective societies.”^[3] Using this criteria, Driver identifies a number of movements throughout church history that have embodied this way of being a church in mission that responds effectively to the adaptive challenges faced by their context. As we begin the journey of discovery a useful guide will be movements and churches that have faithfully responded to complex situations at other points in history.

Another place where we need to look is among the churches of the global south. At this moment in time many of the most vibrant churches on the globe are in the south, even as many churches in the north are struggling. Though we know that there are many reasons for the differences, we also know that we need to be attentive to the growth in other parts of the world. What is it about their situation and response that should influence us? There are clear contextual differences that make a simplistic

comparison impossible. But if the global south is one of the places where the Spirit is clearly moving, we in the global north who want to be attentive in this learning process would do well to ask hard questions about potential reasons for the difference between the north and the south, particularly in relationship to the development of faithful congregations that are clearly involved in God's mission in the world.^[4]

A specific issue where we can learn from the south is in relationship to ministry from the bottom up. Many of these churches are poor and are on the margins of their societies. Yet they seem to be intuitively missional in their approach to being the church. What is it about doing mission and ministry from poverty that creates a different perspective? How can the "rich" churches of the global north learn from this type of ministry? How is the Spirit moving in these places?^[5]

This spiritual attentiveness is enhanced in cross-cultural, multi-cultural, transcultural or inter-cultural settings. Those types of settings "encourage" (i.e., push) us to look at different ways God is working in various situations. They also become the spaces where people can be more easily attentive to new ways of doing ministry, because new encounters invite us to relativize our cultural framings and invite us to recognize that other ways of looking at the church in mission might actually be more useful in our increasingly inter-cultural urban settings. Of course, another part of the reality is that we may have "no choice," since this is the environment in which many churches are already doing mission.

But we also need to look within the places where we are located. We need to be attentive to signs of life and the Spirit in our neighborhoods. We should be particularly attentive to those signs that are outside of our normal range of mission. If we believe that God is at work throughout the world we should not be surprised to find signs of life that we can support as churches.

Yet, when we look into our communities we also need identify and challenge signs of death and self-centeredness. Part of our missional task will need to be prophetic. We need discernment to name the principalities and power that influence the places where God has called us to serve in his name.

Multiple Explorations by the Whole Church

An important word being used in the missional church conversation is that of experiments. The message behind the word is that we need to be open to new ideas about how to do and be church and being willing to walk with these experiments to see if they produce focus and change in our understanding of the church in mission. We recognize that many of the traditional methods of church planting and mission no longer seem to work and even when they "work" the result often produces as many questions as strong churches.

Another word that can help us think about this is "mashups." This word is being used in several domains and basically means bringing together things in ways that we would normally not consider "normal." Missional experiments need to include bringing together things that we have not normally assumed fit together. That means inviting people to think about church and mission in ways that "mess"

with all of our current models. Our concepts of church have been so framed by Western Christendom that we often find it hard to “remember” that the early churches were not linked to our current church model and that they developed around homes, synagogues, and various hiding places, once persecution became common. This invites us to think about church communities that may have little to do with anything we normally call church today.

We begin the process by recognizing that people are in different places. This means that we cannot automatically assume that the “old” no longer works in any environment. Not all churches are in crisis, nor are all denominations. At times the traditional patterns and the traditional congregations will continue to help people be faithful to the gospel and to the church’s mission. Some traditional church models will continue to function effectively in some contexts. In this type of environment the goal is to help people understand that the world is changing and that if they want to continue being faithful they need to be open to new ways of thinking about their role in the world. For “traditional” churches that are strong and growing experimenting is about inviting them to use their existing strength as a base to look toward God’s future, instead of waiting until they hit a crisis. If strong churches develop a missional vision, they will be able to support new models of church and mission with their resources.

If churches that are being “successful” doubt that they need to change, churches in crisis may find change even more difficult. The sense of loss may push many toward nostalgia and a selective memory of the past. It may make them less open to change, determined to reconstruct a past they perceived as more favorable. Instead of being able to visualize a new future, they can only dream of what was, or what they remember.

For existing churches, an important analogy for this task might be “building airplanes in the air.”^[6] Our churches are on the move, yet need to recognize that we to build and rebuild what we are doing so that we can respond to our changing environment.

Outside of the structures of existing church leadership, there are many types of people that can guide us toward experiments, if we give them the opportunity. One of the obvious places to start looking for experimenters is among the young. Younger Christians who grew up in the church understand what is not working in their congregations. Many are questioning the church and leaving, but there is also a space here for new models. If church leaders are ready to walk with young Christians, discipling them and providing new spaces for them, they can point toward the future and not merely focus on their frustrations with the church of their upbringing.

We can also learn from new believers, particularly those that have had a strong conversion experience. Because of their encounter with God they are very interested in sharing their faith and they still have connections “in the world.” Some Pentecostal churches have the practice of inviting new believers to share their faith immediately after conversion and baptism. We need to disciple new believers and invite them to share their faith very early after their conversions. Because most of them have not been socialized into a traditional church they could be encouraged to think about what a missional church might look like among their friends and colleagues.

Another group that can naturally tend toward new models are migrants, particularly those from the dynamic churches of the south. Many will be tempted to assume that it is their models from the south that need to be replicated. But what we most need from them is their spiritual dynamism, their flexibility and their willingness to adapt to new realities. Many of them establish churches and ministries in the most complex and difficult situations. They are modeling a way of thinking that will be crucial as we look toward the future.

Migrants are at the forefront of global changes, such as the changing of the nation-state, national identity and economic models. But many of those Christians are also breaking the Protestant mission models of nation-state based structures and mission as something done from the center of power and money to the periphery. Their mission movements are showing us models that provide us ways of thinking about the church in mission in ways that those of us formed in Christendom cannot even envision.

Another place we need to look for leaders of these new experiments are among the “discarded” adults of our society. We often assume that the elderly are trapped in models from the past. In our youth oriented society the elderly are often marginalized. Yet in a changing world we need all generations to work together. There are many elderly people who have time, skills and energy, and no longer need gainful employment. Given a vision of what might be many older adults might be able to “dream new dreams” and also support those new dreams.

An important issue that leaders need to take into account in this joy of discovery is that the best experimenters will usually be peripheral people, those outside the centers of traditional church power. They usually have not gone through the “official” processes and might not really “fit.” So they have not yet earned the trust of the system. Yet those are the people that will often be able to visualize a different reality, new models of church and mission.

Churches and organizations that are going to be ready for this type of innovation are those that create a culture of experimentation and that value innovation. For example, church planting models in some denominations require so much planning and organization, and money, that experimentation is impossible. Any failures are major losses. But many of the growing Pentecostal denominations take a very different approach. People who have a sense that God has called them to plant a church are encouraged to try it out. If they establish a group or a ministry, then the denomination provides some level of support and investment.

In a sense, churches and denominational structures interested in mission in the midst of adaptive challenge need to develop a mission R&D department. Those open to the journey of discovery will identify those with new ideas and will fund those experiments. By providing spiritual, moral and financial support, one creates a culture that encourages all the people of God to think in new ways about their role in God’s work in the world.^[2]

A spirit of innovation also means recognizing that we need multiple models of leadership development. Most seminaries were developed on a university model with a certain type of church in mind. Yet very

few of the church leaders being formed today will pastor traditional looking churches. That means that we also need “mashup” models of leadership development that combine the educational flexibility of Bible institutes, continuing education from good D.Min. programs, mentorship support, and all types of “on the job” preparation. To prepare missional leaders we will also have to experiment with new models of leadership development. Once again, innovation will be key to providing the biblical and theological foundation to people that are in the process of developing new ways of forming communities of people with the vision to be disciples of Christ in the world.^[8]

These leaders need a solid biblical and theological foundation. But they also need formation in specific areas. They need a practical theology method that helps them connect Scripture to new realities. They also need formation in leadership, particularly interpretive leadership.

But leadership development also needs to address ecclesiology. In practice, our ecclesiologies reflect a Christendom model of the churches’ place in society. We need to reframe our thinking to look toward the margins, to places where churches do not have a central role, but a servant’s role. In a sense, this means focusing on a “free” church theology in the sense of needing more congregations that have the freedom to develop on a local basis, addressing the mission of their concrete context. If we take the “mashup” concept seriously we will need to develop models of church and mission which will often push us to ask: Is this a church?

Naming Some of the Complexities of the Journey

In a journey of discovery, one of the ways one learns is through failure. Part of our task will be to incorporate this type of learning into the discovery process. For those of us taught to only look at “success” as being from God, this attitude will mean a major mental model shift. We will need to learn the joy of failure and its importance as we go forward.

Also, when one is in the midst of adaptive challenges many of the things that seemed sure and indispensable in the past no longer seem that important. The black and white theological battles and debates of one generation may lose their relevance in another. But what will also surely happen is that new circumstances will raise new theological and missiological questions and issues. As we experiment with new models of being a faithful church we will have to face new questions and will be confronted with new theological divisions and challenges. That is why a practical theology method will be an important tool in this journey.

On the one hand a changing society raises new questions. Those types of questions will only become more complex as we seek to be faithful to God’s work in the world. But being attentive to where the Spirit is working will also force to ask hard missional questions. People on the margins may be undocumented, may have a checkered past and may find it hard to fit in existing structures. But they may also be leading movements that obligate us to think in new ways about what it means to be communities of followers of Jesus Christ involved in God’s mission in the world.

Also, because this is about experimentation some of the models may be temporary; they may be crucial for a season, but not necessarily part of the long term. But as we cross class, ethnicity, language, popular culture and many other boundaries this process will often be messy. This process will also break through traditional theological and denominational categories. Some of the new networks and “parishes” will not look like anything we are used to. So we will need to be open to new complexities as we go forward.

Because of the time in which God has called us to serve, it will mean that there will be no road before us. Clearly the way will be made as we move in the power and direction of the Spirit. The lack of assurances will create anxiety for many, but it will also be a time of great opportunity.

What continues to guide us is the light of God’s direction and the expectation that God will work. Because God has worked in the past we have markers that can guide us toward the future. But even as the early church developed in the light of a new Pentecost we continue forward knowing that this is God’s work.

1. Wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking. ¹
2. *La fe en la periferia de la historia Una historia del pueblo cristiano desde la perspectiva de los movimientos de restauración y reforma radical*. Guatemala City: Ediciones SEMILLA, 1997. There is an English version of the book called *Radical Faith An Alternative History of the Christian Church*. Kitchner, Ontario: Pandora Press, 1999. The English version is not as detailed as the original Spanish version. ¹
3. *La fe*, p. 30 - Author’s translation. ¹
4. Several authors have written about the church in the global south. A sample of these books include: Jehu Hanciles’ *Beyond Christendom Globalization, African Migration and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), Lamin Sanneh’s *Disciples of All Nations Pillars of World Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Phillip Jenkins’ *The Next Christendom The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). ¹
5. Electronic Data Systems (EDS) developed a commercial using this analogy. That video has circulated on youtube for several years (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2zqTYgcpfg>). ¹
6. Electronic Data Systems (EDS) developed a commercial using this analogy. That video has circulated on youtube for several years (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2zqTYgcpfg>). ¹
7. The missional church discussion has invited leaders to cultivate a missional imagination. Several of the Leadership Network publications address aspects of this crucial issue. Mark Lau Branson and I have addressed this issue in relationship to intercultural relations in *Churches, Cultures and Leadership A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011). ¹
8. Bible institutes have been crucial in forming leaders in many parts of the world. Formal structures, such as seminaries, have not been able to succeed in many parts of the majority world. When they are working well they are more flexible at many levels. They are cheaper, are able to prepare people no matter what background education they have, adapt to people’s schedules, etc. Among US Latino Protestants Bible Institutes have been the principal method for preparing people for ministry. For example, see *Centro Hispano de Estudios Teológicos* (www.chet.org). ¹



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