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Spiritual Direction as Missional Ministry

Abstract

Spiritual Direction is a ministry sharing characteristics with the missional church movement. It mirrors the “missional shifts” outlined by Reggie McNeal, assists people in living a liminal existence in a state of *communitas* (as described by Hirsch) and assists people in continuing the spiritual journey after mystical experiences of union, thus helping them be more oriented toward living for others and sharing in the *missio dei*.

Spiritual Direction as Missional Ministry

Missio Dei literally means “Mission of God.” Missional Church is more than the next big thing in popular Christianity. Christians with a theology of mission or strong missiology will argue that reorienting their lives and their church along missional lines is revolutionary and involves a completely different way of being and of being church. A missional perspective sees the church primarily as a missionary body, a group on the move to bring the gospel to a particular cultural context in which the missionary group finds itself embedded. Missions, outreach and social justice are not programs of the church according to the missional world view, but the reason the church exists. Mission is not a tool of the church. The church is a tool of God’s mission. The church doesn’t have a mission so much as God’s mission has a church. Missional Christians will often speak about returning to the mindset of the early Jesus communities when the emphasis was on spreading the good news, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and radically including everyone in this saving work.

Missional church planter and consultant Alan Hirsch calls the methods of the early church the “Forgotten Ways.” Hirsch says the church always has at its disposal six latent, potent strategies or tools for being missional. These are: the centrality of Jesus, disciple making, the missional-incarnational impulse, organic

systems, apostolic environment, and *communitas* -a type of community formed in situations of significant ordeal and/or mission (2006).

Hirsch and Michael Frost, among others, argue that the contemporary church in the west, especially in North America, is in long-term decline, and has lost its way and its mission in favor of being an inward focused institution designed to provide customer oriented service in a religious market place (2003). Whereas God is a sending God who sent prophets and teachers and Jesus, and Jesus sent his disciples in the great commission, today's church is largely an attractional church designed to market its wares and compete with other churches to see who can offer the best childcare, the fanciest praise band, the tastiest coffee hour food, and the most activities for youth and parents in the afternoons and evenings. The attractional church is designed to take care of its members while the missional church is focused on healing, feeding, and saving the world. What does the missional church movement have to do with spiritual direction and spiritual directors? Much.

The ministry of spiritual direction is, in and of itself, a missional activity, as it is a ministry that participates in God's activity in the world. In their book, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Incarnation and Mission for the 21st Century Church*, Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch quote the Gospel and Our Culture Network who claim that missional ministry, "visibly and effectively participates in God's activity, just as Jesus indicated when he referred to it in metaphorical language as salt, yeast, and light in the world" (2003). Spiritual directors are direct witnesses to the activity of

God in people's lives and help others see the salt, yeast and light active not only in the world, but in their own lives.

According to Frost and Hirsch, a missional church makes mission its priority and perpetually asks itself, "What has God called us to be and do in our current cultural context?" (2003). This is the heart of what a spiritual director is doing. The art and ministry of walking with others on their journey with God is being with them and helping them to ask, "What is God calling you to be and do in the current context of your life?" Viewed this way, there can no better preparation for a missional life, nor any better spiritual practice for those on a missional journey, than to be in spiritual direction.

Spurning the attractational methods of much of contemporary American Christianity, the missional church is incarnational – it seeks to be the hands and feet of God at work in the world. Frost and Hirsch say, "By incarnational we mean it does not create sanctified spaces into which unbelievers must come to encounter the gospel. Rather, the missional church disassembles itself and seeps into the cracks and crevices of a society..."(2003).

Spiritual direction, at its missional core, is also incarnational in that the spiritual director assists the person seeking direction to see God in all areas of their life and in all aspects of creation. Being an incarnational ministry, a spiritual director has the opportunity, possibly for the first time with some people, to take God for walk, out of the sanctuary and other sanctified places and into the ordinary, messy, dark and troubling places of the world and of a person's own life.

Writing in his forthcoming book, *Growing into God: A Beginner's Guide to Christian Mysticism*, John Mabry discusses the role of the spiritual director. "In training spiritual directors, I hammer home again and again that we are here for one thing and one thing only: to foster intimacy between the client and the Divine" (2012).

The missional church movement is a drastic, some would even say revolutionary, approach to church in the west. Most congregations in America derive the health and status of church life by the size of the congregation and the size of the church budget. The missional movement is starting to see the church's success not in terms of numbers of members nor the size of the church budget, but how much healing and restoration they can bring to abandoned places and forgotten people.

In his book *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church*, Reggie McNeal (2009) suggests three important shifts churches need to make in their thinking and their behavior in order to become missionally oriented and he also proposes a revolution in how churches keep score of success. McNeal's missional shifts and his new scorecard have correlations to spiritual direction as missional ministry.

McNeal's three shifts are:

1. From an internal to an external focus
2. From program development to people development
3. From Church-based to Kingdom-based leadership

The first shift asks a church to move focusing on itself to the world outside itself. The world outside the church's walls rather than people within them becomes the primary recipient of a congregation's ministry, service, time, money and energy. Spiritual direction is a ministry dedicated to assisting people in paying attention to shifts in focus. Is God calling you to pay attention to internal matters? What about external matters? What about how your body is feeling? Are you too much in your head? Is God only in your head? Where's God in the world around you? Helping people hear the still small voice in their heart *and* in the world is what spiritual directors do.

The second shift asks churches to move from program development to people development in terms of core activity. This is also a shift that examines the heart of the ministry of spiritual direction – people development. Spiritual direction is about human persons, not about following a creed, a dogma, or a curriculum for spiritual progress, but following and accompanying each individual on their journey. For many directees, it is a shift in how they have encountered religion, church and God.

The third shift asks churches to move from a congregational-based leadership focus to thinking of themselves as leaders in their communities. Instead of church leadership energy going into managing the congregational system, leaders seek should seek to be working with others in the community to develop the beloved community to the betterment of all.

Again, this shift is mirrored in the ministry of spiritual direction. God's area of activity is greater than just congregational or church life. Frequently spiritual directors do not practice their ministry as part of a particular congregation, but as a service to the church universal and to the community as a whole beyond the Christian church.

When McNeal talks about changing the scorecard for the church, instead of measuring members and money, McNeal encourages keeping track of things such as community service hours and amount of time spent in prayer. McNeal's change is a shift from what congregational health consultants call a concern for numerical growth to a concern for maturational growth and incarnational growth – developing people's spirits and ability to serve in the world. Changing the scorecard is a missional call to stop being so concerned about numbers and money and start being concerned about developing souls and serving the world. It's a concern to develop the mystic in everyone. This is what spiritual direction does. The practice of spiritual direction makes relationship with God primary. The missional church has an unexpressed belief that everyone is an ordinary, everyday mystic. Spiritual direction facilitates the mystic journey for ordinary everyday people.

In *Growing into God: A Beginner's Guide to Christian Mysticism*, Mabry outlines an introduction to Christian mysticism explaining that after a process of seeking God, awakening to God, losing God through an experience of the dark night of the soul and the dark night of the senses, the mystic joins together with the divine

in a transcendent experience of union with God where God's will and the mystic's will become one. What God wants and what the mystic wants become fused.

The mystic's journey culminates in union with God with the mystic's mission and God's mission becoming one and the same. The goal of the missional church community is for the community to take on the *missio dei* – for the church's mission and God's mission to be one and the same. The more individuals who are able to reach a place in their own spiritual journey where they see their own life's mission as the *missio dei*, the more powerful missional communities will be that are made up of such people. Missional communities that encourage their people to make use of spiritual direction and spiritual directors who are aware that such communities exist around them can be powerful resources for one another.

Not every person who comes to spiritual direction understands themselves to be a mystic or even wants to be, yet the journey many people take in their spiritual life mirrors the mystic's journey, as laid out by Mabry. It is not an unknown path. Although many people may not label the stages of their journey as such, upon reflection the places they've been align with experiences of the mystic's journey that lead to union with the divine. Many people drawn to lives of service have some experience of spiritual union be it in a Christian context or in another religious framework.

A well-known modern example of a union story is that of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. struggling with the leadership of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and having an experience of mystical experience late one night at his kitchen table. As

the Boycott intensified, King was arrested while driving boycotters, his home received ever more frequent phone calls threatening to bomb his house and family and assuring him that he would not leave town alive unless he left immediately. King had not wanted the leadership of the boycott, but came to realize it was his calling and his cross. David J. Garrow reports in *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* that even though King was the son and grandson of preachers, he had never had an experience of God like he did that night (1986). King would relate the evening years later in a sermon called "Why Jesus Called a Man a Fool" delivered at Mount Pisgah Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago on August 27, 1967.

"I discovered then that religion had to become real to me and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down over that cup of coffee—I never will forget it. And oh yes, I prayed a prayer and I prayed out loud that night. I said, "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right; I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now; I'm faltering; I'm losing my courage. And I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak." (Yes) I wanted tomorrow morning to be able to go before the executive board with a smile on my face.

And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness, stand up for justice, stand up for truth. (Yes) And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world."

And I'll tell you, I've seen the lightning flash. I've heard the thunder roll. I felt sin-breakers dashing, trying to conquer my soul. But I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No, never alone. No, never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone." (1967)

The mystic's journey culminates in union with God after which the desire to bring about the Kingdom of God, the reign of God, the world as it could be, an existence of peace and justice, or as King called it -the beloved community - becomes the mystic's mission because it is God's mission. It's easy enough to see how this was so in Dr. King's situation. For an increasing number of people, the religious life is seen not as worshiping King's God, but in imitating King's life.

This is the more challenging aspect of religious life, the surprise ending to union with the divine. There is no heaven on earth awaiting those who reach this point of union, but instead construction work to done creating heaven on earth. Union only means realizing that your job is to build the beloved community.

"The way the mystics describe it is this: once you have achieved Union, once your life and God's life have merged so completely that there is no distinction between you, when your will is knit so finely to the divine will that what God wants is what you want, then you cannot help but to direct your every step out of love and compassion for others, for that is what God does.

This is the end of mysticism—not warm and fuzzy feelings, not an emotional opiate, not being lost in bliss, not obedience, not even a love

relationship between me and God, because it does not end there. Mary was right, the love relationship between her and Jesus is a good thing, but Martha is even more correct—if this love does not reach beyond itself, if it is not moved to compassionate action on behalf of others, it is an immature love, even an aborted love”(Mabry, 2012).

Spiritual Directors have a crucial ministry in helping people do this work. The more people who are able to do this work in a congregation, the more able the congregation is to focus on mission. The church’s mission is God’s mission: to feed the hungry, heal the sick, comfort the downhearted, and free the oppressed. There is no longer any need to visit foreign lands to be a missionary. You can be on mission in your city, your own neighborhood, even your own street.

The need for spiritual direction in mission will never cease. There is much work and discernment still to be done on the other side of union. For both individuals and communities, there are pitfalls to identifying closely with God’s mission. History is littered with the deadly fallout of the mission of false prophets and self-appointed messiahs.

Mystical experiences can lead to withdrawal as easily as they can to action. Having had a transcendent experience of the divine, a person is very capable of seeking out that experience over and over again, like a drug, as a way to escape the harsh realities of the world or of their own life. A spiritual director can waves flags of warning against this or at the very least reflect back to a directee that they see it happening.

Another pitfall of union is fundamentalism. Having had a transcendent experience of the divine, having had an experience that the divine mission is one's own, it is entirely possible for someone to claim to be God's sole mouthpiece and have the only authentic vision of, or insight into, God's plan. Jamestown, Waco and other tragedies attest to the power of unchecked mysticism.

“Political notions of individual rights and a spiritual understanding that mystical knowledge is essentially metaphorical are both foreign to any form of fundamentalism. The mullahs of whatever faith are sure they know what God wants and they have whips and chains to put that knowledge into practice (Gottlieb, 2001).”

The role of the spiritual director is needed to set up reflectors on the road to mission. The spiritual life is ultimately not about self-improvement, it is about knowing the self and knowing God in order to serve others. This is the mystic's journey. The spiritual director is able to point out when the divine flashes warning signs at the chasms of narcissism and self-promotion.

Perhaps the most profound way in which spiritual direction is a missional ministry is the way in which it mirrors the “forgotten way” of *communitas*. *communitas* is different from the form of community most American churches treasure. *communitas* is a community formed in the context of risk, challenge, ordeal, mission. Members of the *communitas* become team players, comrades, have each other's back and the community is forged through the process of the shared experience of striving through the challenge for the goal and serving the mission. Community for its own sake can turn inward on itself and make the maintenance of

the community it's mission (2006). As Paulo Coelho says, "The ship is safest when it is in port. But that's not what ships were made for."

In *The Forgotten Ways* Hirsch describes *communitas* this way:

"It involves adventure and movement, and it describes the unique experience of togetherness that only really happens among a group of people inspired by the vision of a better world who actually attempt to do something about it. It is here where the safe, middle-class consumerist captivity of the church is so problematic. And it is here where the adaptive challenge of the twenty-first century could be God's invitation to the church to rediscover itself as a missional *communitas*" (2006).

While some missiologists and theologians argue that the liminal state of *communitas* is a transitional state the church must pass through on its way to becoming more missional, Hirsch's argument is that *communitas*, like the other forgotten ways of the early church are the constant operational modes the church needs to practice in order to be vital, missional, apostolic and meaningful. Missional isn't a stage, it is a way of being.

Spiritual directors forge a relationship of *communitas* with their directees. At its best the practice of spiritual direction helps people not as a transitional phase in their lives or on their journey with God (although that is certainly the case in some instances), but reorients people into a new way of being and seeing the divine and its presence in their lives. Liminality, at least as far as walking with God is concerned becomes not a stage, but in some very real and important ways a way of

life. God is always at work transforming, speaking, sharing, listening – this in its own right is a forgotten way, a forgotten practice for many. People will go to many to lengths to recapture it.

I'll end where Frost and Hirsch begin *The Shaping of Things to Come* – at The Burning Man Festival in the Black Rock Dessert of Nevada. Since 1986 people have gathered to build a temporary community and burn a wooden man in effigy. There is art and alternative everything. It is about belonging, self-reliance, ritual, celebration, and survival. In the middle of nowhere, thousands gather to share a liminal experience. As Frost and Hirsch note, liminal comes from the Latin, meaning “threshold” and signifies an in-between time. It refers to a transitional, temporary experience of transformation (2003).

Frost and Hirsch begin with Burning Man and I end with it because it is an example of postmodern culture that has “raised within the West many expectations for an experiential, activist form of religious, mystical experience” (2003).

Spiritual directors may not think of themselves as activists or as missionaries, but I think they are both. I agree with Frost and Hirsch that the “contemporary traditional church is increasingly seen as the least likely option for those seeking an artistic, politically subversive, activist community of faith”(2003). I also believe there are many people in our culture looking for God and looking for such communities. Frequently, spiritual direction is their entry not only into their mystic journey, but into a more missional life. Spiritual directors walk with people into liminal space. Sometimes it is through the dark night of the soul into union,

sometimes it is just encountering God openly and honestly, but it is always a transformational experience. Spiritual direction is not only a resource for the missional church, but a missional ministry.

References

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Presentation of the Project on Thursday, February 23, 2012

The paper was emailed to fellow seminar participants and teachers in my Thursday group on February 17, 2012.

The evening of February 23, 2012, my seminar presentation with the showing of two short video clips to re-introduce themes of missional church. These clips may be found at:

<http://youtu.be/ORGKjU4-FCU> (Pastor Mike Slaughter explains the concept of church as missional outpost)

and

http://youtu.be/_W5w61pwuCE (Michael Frost on Missional Church)

I covered these main points from my paper in an oral presentation:

Reggie McNeal's Missional Shifts:

Becoming a missional church will require churches to make three shifts, both in thinking and in behavior.

The first shift is from being internally focused to being externally focused. The world outside the church's walls rather than people within them becomes the primary recipient of a congregation's ministry, service, time, money and energy.

This is the essence of spiritual direction - how to assist people in being internally focused and externally focused - to hear the still small voice of God in one's self and in the world. What's crazier to hear the voice of God when it's only rolling thunder or to only hear thunder when it's the voice of God?

The second shift is from program development to people development in terms of core activity.

This is also a shift that pinpoints the ministry of spiritual direction - people development. Spiritual direction is about human persons, not about following a creed, a dogma, or a curriculum for spiritual progress, but following and accompanying each individual on their journey. For many directees it is a shift in how they have encountered religion, spirituality and God.

The third shift is from congregational based leadership focus to beloved community based leadership focus. Instead of leadership energy going into managing the congregational system, we seek to be leaders working with others in the community to develop the beloved community to the betterment of all.

Again, this shift is mirrored in the ministry of spiritual direction. Not what can you do for the church, but what can you do for the world. God's area of activity is greater than just congregational or church life.. Frequently spiritual directors do not practice their ministry as part of a particular congregation, but as a service to the church universal and to the community as a whole beyond the Christian church.

Communitas Not Community

Communitas is a community formed in the context of risk, challenge, ordeal, and mission. Members of the *communitas* become team players, comrades, and have each other's back and the community is forged through the process of the shared experience of striving through the challenge for the goal and serving the mission. Community for its own sake can turn inward on itself and make the maintenance of the community its mission.

Spiritual direction and the relationship with a directee is a relationship of *communitas*. Journeying out into life, trusting God, is risky, it is an ordeal and an adventure, a challenge in which the directee trusts the director and both trust God. When it becomes just a safe haven, it is friendship – and that's fine, but it's not direction. Spiritual direction again shows the characteristics of being missional.

I followed the oral presentation with a time for questions about the presentation and the paper.

I then led the group through the activity Missional Monopoly. See Appendix A.

I then asked the group to read the reading on the Reflections Handout (See Appendix B), journal and share their responses.

Closing prayer.

Appendix A: Missional Monopoly Activity:

Social Justice Monopoly for Four (or more) Players

This activity is described for four players or teams, but can be adapted for more or less people as numbers dictate.

Play the game Monopoly. Twice. It's best to play with at least four people for the purposes of this demonstration. The first time, play the game straight up by the rules that come with the game. If you or the participants are familiar with the game, this gives you a baseline and if you or the participants are not familiar with the game, it teaches you the game for the purposes of giving you a base line for game two.

Play a second game of Monopoly. This time, however randomly assign or draw for playing assignment as Player 1,2,3 and 4.

Player ONE is the Top Hat and goes first. Begins the game on Boardwalk, with triple the usual starting money (\$4,500) and both Get Out of Jail Free Cards already owning Boardwalk and Park Place, No. Caroline Ave, Pennsylvania Ave., Pacific Ave., Baltic Ave., and Mediterranean Ave. All these properties already have hotels on them. Player One also owns all the Railroads and both utilities.

Player TWO is the Car and goes second. Begins the game on Illinois Ave with double the usual starting money (\$3000), already owning Illinois Ave., Indiana Ave., Kentucky Ave., New York Ave., Tennessee Ave. and St. James Place, each with two houses.

Player THREE is the Cowboy and goes third. Begins the game on Oriental Ave. with the usual starting money (\$1500), already owning Oriental Ave., Connecticut Ave., and Vermont Ave.

Player FOUR (FIVE, SIX, SEVEN, ETC) is the Wheel Barrow (ETC) and goes fourth (fifth, sixth, seventh, etc), beginning on GO with NO money and NO property.

Appendix B:

Missional Monopoly / Spiritual Direction and Mission Reflection Handout

Mission Houston (<http://www.missionhouston.org/>) asks participants in their Faithwalking 101 retreat “How can you more fully embrace missional living as your way of life?” Mission Houston claims “The lines between Jesus’ view and the western world view of what it means to be fully human have become so blurred that to live missionally most of us will need to be transformed.”

Many Christians have places in their hearts and minds where they know what Jesus teaches and for a variety of reasons, including the loss of ease, comfort, position, status and income either ignore or disregard these teachings and/or the values they represent.

Luke 4:16-20

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “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.” And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

MLK on the Jericho Road

“A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”

- Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The Three R’s of Christian Community Development

From his experience in poverty relief, Rev. Dr. Perkins has developed three principles encapsulating this approach. He calls them “the three R’s of community development.”

The first “R” is relocation. Perkins firmly believes in the importance of relocating to communities in need and living among the poor (as he has done many times over the past four decades)... Living the gospel means desiring for your neighbor and

your neighbor's family that which you desire for yourself and your family." Only by joining a community do a community's needs become one's own. Living the gospel means sharing the suffering and pain of others, and relocation transforms "you, them, and theirs," to "we, us, and ours." "Effective ministries plant and build communities of believers that have a personal stake in the development of their neighbors," Perkins maintains.

The second "R" is reconciliation. The reconciliation of people to God, and the reconciliation of neighbor to neighbor. Through the gospel this process requires breaking down every racial, ethnic, or economic barrier to opportunity, such that as Christians people can come together to solve the problems of their shared community.

The third "R" is redistribution. Perkins believes in the importance of economic development and the redistribution of resources. But this commitment does not mean the heavy hand of government taking from one member of a community to give to another. It requires, rather, "bringing our lives, our skills, our educations, and our resources and putting them to work to empower people in a community of need. [This] is redistribution and it helps people to break out of the cycle of poverty."

Questions for Reflection:

Think of three R's of Christian Community Development, the passage from Luke and the quote from Dr. King in the context of Mission Houston's claim that Jesus' world view and the western world have become blurred and in the context of the Monopoly game.

In what way(s) do you see your life and ministry in a missional context?

How might Guilt and Shame hinder your ability to live missionally? How might guilt and shame manifest in a director's ability to follow God's call to lead a more missional life?

What are the implications of the good news for the cultural context of this Monopoly game?

Where do you find God in the world of this Monopoly game?

How might people seeking an artistic, risky, activist, community of faith experience this Monopoly game?

How can you best walk with people seeking an artistic, politically subversive, activist community of mystical faith? What particular challenges and joys might they bring to your practice of direction?